

# ガンゲート

自衛隊  
彼の地にて、  
斯く戦えり

1. 接触編

Illustration: 黒獅子  
柳内たくみ  
Yanai Takumi

上

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# 自衛隊 ゲート

1. 接触編

上

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彼の地にて  
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黒薔薇のように広がる  
ロウリイのスカート。

徹底的に黒で固めたガータベルトとショーツ、  
そしてなめらかな曲線で描かれた美脚を、  
シンクロナイズドスイミングのように見せつけて、  
回転する勢いをそのままハルバートに乗せて円を描く。





## Gate - Thus the JSDF Fought There! Volume 01

### Prologue

Year 20XX, Summer

It was recorded as one of the warmest days in history.

With the high level of humidity in the city coupled with temperatures of over 30 degree Celsius, it felt like it was hell. However, it was a Saturday, many people still crowded the shopping mall to shop or to just stroll around.

11:15 A.M.

When the sun was high up in the sky and the temperature was reaching its highest point, a 'Gate to the Other World' opened up in the middle of Ginza district.

From it emerged numerous cavalry and infantry donned with armor from medieval Europe. Accompanying them were fantasy monsters such as orcs, goblins, and even giants.

They assaulted the people who happened to be there.

Regardless of age or nationality, their objective was massacring the people. Due to it being an era of peace, the people lack means of self defense and could only scream in terror as they collapsed under the attack.

The shoppers, parents, and even foreign tourists. Not one was spared from the hooves of the horses, the sharp spears of the soldiers, or the swords that brought death. The whole area was dyed black and red from pools of blood. If one were to describe the gruesome scene, it would be 'Hell'.

This army from the other world planted a black army flag on a mountain of corpses and loudly declared without any audience that this land had been conquered by them in their own language.

‘Ginza Incident.’

It was the name of the incident to this first contact of the otherworldly people by historians.

The Prime Minister of Japan that time---Houjou Shinegori, declared in the National Congress that “the place beyond the Gate did not exist on any map.”

“What is the situation beyond the Gate? What kind of natural environments, human lifestyles and animal species would be discovered beyond the Gate? How advanced is their culture? What level is their technology at? Their religion? What kind of governmental structure do the people beyond the Gate use?”

“During that period of time, many criminals were arrested.”

“However, using the word ‘arrested’ would be displeasing. Prisoners of war were out of the expectations of the law. Based on Japan’s current law, there were no such thing as prisoners of war. According to the judiciary system, they were simply criminals that broke the law.”

“Even if Japan is accused of using such flimsy argument, they would still consider the land beyond the Gate a part of Japan.”

“As one would expect, the land beyond the Gate consisted of things that the government did not know of; such as land, human population, or even the existence of a government.”

“Even if a government exist there, without confirming the borders of the country or even establishing diplomatic relations with it, it could not be recognized as an independent country.”

At this stage, they are just“ armed terrorists who slaughtered people mercilessly.”

“Although there had been suggestions to conduct peaceful dialogue with them, the other party had to be willing to sit down with us at the negotiation table. But how do we do that? Practically speaking, there was no way to communicate with them.”

“We will make the other party meet with us in peaceful dialogue, even if we had to use brute force. We will do all we can, even if we have to grab them by their heads.”

In order to gain the favorable side in a discussion, one must know about his enemy first.

We arrested those criminals... despite the language barrier, we still managed to glean some information from them. But that alone is not enough. We need to send someone to investigate, and see with our own eyes and ears.”

“Thus, people must be sent to the other side of the Gate. However, they were not allowed to harm innocent civilians while at the same time harboring a sense of awareness against danger as they traverse the barbaric lands.”

“Also, going in unarmed would not do. Based on initial reports, there was a chance we will need to fight. In these uncharted lands, the judgement of who is friend and who is foe would be left to the on-site personnels.”

“Although some of our colleagues in the senate pointed out there was no need to venture into such a dangerous place, why not render the Gate unworkable and just demolish it once and for all. However, would it be safe to simply close it?”

“Many citizens harboured feelings of unease as to where the Gate would appear next. Who knows, it may just materialise in front of your homes or family. Also, there was also the problem of justice and compensation for the family of the victims.”

“Should a government exist beyond the Gate, Japan would not hesitate to extradite the leader and request his sincere apologies and compensation for this incident.”

“Should the other party refuse to oblige, then Japan would flex its muscles and apprehend the one responsible for the incident sentence him through our justice system. Should the one responsible hold any properties, it would all be used to compensate the family members of the victims of the Ginza incident. From the perspective of the family of victims, this was only natural.”

“Thus, the government of Japan had decided to deploy its Self-Defense Force beyond the Gate. The objectives are to investigate, apprehend, and demand compensations from the one responsible.”

Although there had been some objections from the opposition party, the decision to deploy the JSDF into the Gate proceeded without a hitch. On the other hand, the government of the United State of America had declared that it ‘will not hesitate to aid the investigation of the land beyond the Gate with its utmost strength’ while Prime Minister Houjou had replied that ‘it is currently unneeded’ and ‘will request for it should the situation calls for it’.

The Chinese government released a statement that ‘the Gate is an unnatural phenomenon’ and ‘should be investigated with joint international effort’. Declaring that although the Gate had appeared in Japan’s territory, it should not be under the control of a sole country so that it alone can reap its benefits.



“Please pardon me from being blunt, but this is way out of control. There is an unprecedented troop loss in the history of this empire. Does your Majesty have a plan to curb this problem?”

As a senator as well as a noble, Marquis Casel did not mince his words as he addressed the Emperor Molt Sol Augustus who was sitting on the throne.

With all the senators present in the hall, even if one of them speak with such disrespect towards the Emperor, he will be forgiven. They believed such attitude was required of them..

In the dim hall.

The main design theme of the senate hall was sombre, forsaking elegant decorations for sturdy and serene masonry. There were around three hundred serious looking men sitting in a circle on benches around the centre of the hall. These said men were all senators of the Empire.

Should one desire to be a senator, there were several paths. One such path was to be born in an influential family. No matter which country it is, nobles make up a small portion of the people, but it was not the same for the capital of the Empire. If one were to throw a stone out of a random window in the capital, there was a great chance that it will hit a noble.

Thus, if you desire the role of a senator, it was useless even if you were born of nobility. Only the nobles among nobles and the best of the best could be granted such position.

Does this mean that if you were not born of nobility, then you don't have a chance to become a senator? It was not so. Should one hold the position of a minister or a position of general in the army or higher, he would have a shot at becoming a senator.

In order to process the confusing and heavy work of managing a country, the existence of bureaucracy was necessary. If one of the

common people possess the talents and abilities of a senator, with some luck, hard work and achievements he may be granted the position of a senator.

There were many types of Ministers; Prime Minister, Internal Affairs, Finance, Agriculture, Foreign Affairs. The ones taking the path of working up from a minister of an army general, once they retire, they would be bestowed with a seat in the senate. Commoners were allowed to hold the position of an army general as well. Being commissioned as an officer in the army meant gaining knighthood, so it was possible for them to rise further and become a noble.

Marquis Casel was born in a Baron family that only ranked moderate in the hierarchy. It was only through his past achievements and his service as a minister that he was granted the seat of a senator. He was the hardworking type of person that tried his best to fulfill his role and responsibility. In other words, the oppressive dominant type.

Thus, he was feared for his bold attitude and sharp tongue that was said to be able to drive a grownup to tears.

"It was a grave mistake to dismiss the enemy as weak and spineless after capturing just a handful of them"

"What should have been done was to scout and investigate the opponent's power to determine their strength. Then, conclude whether it was more beneficial to take them as friends or foe." continued the Marquis.

It was not wrong to say that the situation now was dire.

This expedition had cost the empire 60 percent of its army. Although it was possible to replenish them, enormous costs and time would be needed.

With only less than half of its military power, how was the Empire going to maintain its dominant position?

In the thirty years of Emperor Molt's reign, he had been pushing for a militaristic governance. The conflict with the neighbouring countries outside borders and the vassal states and tribes within was resolved by the intimidation of force, granting peace and stability to the empire. Before their overwhelming armies, all other nations had no choice but to submit. Those who opposed the empire had all been wiped out. No matter how strongly the vassals felt about the empire, in the face of the powerful Empire armies, they had no other options other than concealing their displeasure.

However, now that the armies of the Empire had been reduced to less than half its strength, what actions will the vassals and foreign countries that had been enduring the oppression take?

As Marquis Casel, the leader of Liberalism group waved his toga, he asked the Emperor:

"Your Majesty! How are you planning to lead this country!?"

After Marquis Casel finished his speech, he returned to his seat. Staring at the one who criticised him, the emperor shifted his body slow and steadily, leaning forward and opened his mouth.

"Marquis... I have considered this situation. After this loss, the superiority of the Empire's army would be weakened for a time, however, it is useless to cry over spilt milk. Would the foreign nations and our vassal states who had long hidden their detest for us, form a coup d'état and march their army into the capital? Ahh, just thinking about that makes you lose sleep at night, correct? How heartbreaking."

After hearing playful words of the emperor, the tense atmosphere in the hall had been shaken by the quiet laughter.

"Do you remember the Battle of Akuteku 250 years ago, my dear senators? How did our great predecessors react to the news of the army's total defeat? Did they lament their lost valour and pride, and negotiate for peace, which was as good as admitting defeat?"

"Is the memory of how the females of the Empire reacted to the situation still in your minds?"

"They said: 'So what if we lost 60 thousand men?! We will birth that number in no time!' while rolling up their skirts for others to see!"

"These stories of the heroines of this country, I hope that there is nothing to be said anymore."

"Dire situations like this had been experienced by the Empire countless of times ever since its establishment. The Emperor of our Empire has always worked together with the senate and citizens as one to face these trials, that's how the empire grew so strong."

All of what the Emperor had said the history of the Empire.

For the senators, these were all stories they were familiar with.

"There is no such thing as a sure victory in a war. Should the general take responsibility for every loss in the war, then there will be no such thing as potential commander. Should we be playing the blaming game while the enemy surrounds the Capital?"

The senators shook their head in disagreement with such a course of action.

If no one was seeking the one to blame for the loss, then the emperor will naturally be exempted from responsibility. Realising that the Emperor had evaded his responsibility without a hitch, Marquis Casel clicked his tongue in annoyance.

Thus, the emperor continued his speech.

This expedition's army had consisted of veteran soldiers, wise and powerful mages, as well as carefully selected fierce orcs and goblins.

With sufficient supplies and intense training, coupled with an excellent commander, this was a great formation.

The general took on the duties of a commander, centurions perform the task of centurions and the rank and files did their part as well.

Despite all that, it took only seven days.

It's been only seven days since the opening of the Gate. Counting from the day the enemy counter-attacked seriously, it took them only two days to devastate the Empire's army.

The soldiers were either dead or taken prisoner. They could only assume the ones making it back alive would just be a handful.

Now that the Gate had been taken over by the enemy, it was impossible to close it with the enemy turtling around the Gate on the Arnus hill.

In order gain back the possession of the Gate, thousands of cavalry was committed in a charge. But that only resulted in the foot of Arnus hill being littered by the corpse of men and horses.

"Are you aware of the enemy's weapon's strength? It went Bang Bang Bang!!! The moment the enemy from afar made these noises, the army collapsed in a pool of blood. Never in this old one's life have seen such powerful magic before!"

Godasen, a member of the senators as well as a mage explained the engagement with the enemies excitedly.

The unit he led were blown away like leaves in a storm, unable to even go past the feet of the hill. When he realized it, the surrounding was quiet and he was the only one who could move. All he could see were bodies of men and horses littering the blood-pooled ground.

Closing his eyes, the emperor said: "The enemies have infiltrated the land here. Although it seems that they are now building a fort around the Gate, they will one day start their real invasion. We need to face the other-worldly enemy on Arnus hill as well as the hostile vassal countries."

"Let's just wage a war with'em!"

A bald knight, Marquis Podawan stood up, made a respectful gesture towards the emperor and suggested the idea of war.

"If cornered, the best way to fight back is to fight back with courage. Let's gather the troops scattered around the Empire and quell those vassal countries and rebels who dare stand against the Empire. Then, we will turn around and destroy the other-worldly people on the Arnus hill. To put it simply, attack the Gate!"

The senators only shrugged their shoulders when they heard his brutish opinion, implying that 'if that was possible we wouldn't need to go through this trouble'. If they gather all their remaining force, the defense and peace around the Empire would fail.

With everyone giving their own opinion, the hall soon became a scene of chaos.

Podawan replied with shocking words that by killing all the rebels and enslaving the women and children, the cities would be deserted and worries about another uprising... Although it may seem an unrealistic way to deal with the problem, but there was such cases in the history of the Empire.

Back in the days when the Empire was still a small country surrounded on all sides by enemies, when they invaded the enemy countries, the Empire enslaved the people, destroyed the cities, burn down the forests, and scattered salt in the fields to render it infertile. By rendering the area uninhabitable through scorched earth tactics, the Empire was kept safe from threats.

“Even if we can do that, how are we going to defeat the enemies at Arnus? If we use brute force, wouldn’t it just be a repeat of the Battle of Godasen?”

As the voice in hall reached his ears, Podawan gritted his teeth and responded.

“Argh.....just recruit all the troops from the vassal countries without telling them the reason. This way we can muster up an army of a hundred thousand! Even if they are weak, they can still be meat shields for us when we charge!”

“Would they be so obedient?”

“Then what reason should we use to make them muster their troops? Tell them honestly that we lost more than half of our own troops? If we do that, we would only get humiliated.”

Marquis Casel is having a headache from Marquis Podawan’s irrational and useless suggestions.

The friction between the War Faction and Peace Faction caused the whole hall to be filled with static electricity from their growing conflict.

“So whaddaya suggest we do, huh!?!?”

“You war maniac!”

The senators had lost their cool and was on the verge of communicating with their fists.

Only time was wasted. Those few still with rational minds thought fervently for a plan but couldn't stop the squabbles in the hall.

Amidst this chaotic scene, Emperor Molt stood up from his throne.

Sensing the emperor had something to say, the arguing senators quieten down.

"Although it seems a little rough, Marquis Podawan's words was inspiring."

Hearing these words, Podawan bowed respectfully towards the emperor.

Before the regal Emperor, the senators calmed down and listened to what the emperor had to say.

"Now, the problem is what do we do? Do we watch helplessly as the situation become worse? That is one way, but I do not wish to do so. If not, all that's left is war. Let's go with the proposition made by Marquis Podawan and muster troops from all the vassal countries. Send a messenger to each country and request aid from the leaders to repel the other-worldly invaders of the Falmat Continent. An alliance army between the countries shall be formed to attack Arnus hill.

"An alliance army?"

The words of the emperor caused the senators to be in chaos.

Around 200 years ago, in order to repel the tribe of cavalry from the north from invading the Empire's land, many countries banded together in battle. These countries who were constantly at war with each other

had united under the cause of “an invading unfamiliar force is coming, there’s no time to bicker about our past conflicts”.

The kings and knights who were once enemies. stood together and fought off the invading forces. This story had been passed down as a chapter in the story of heroes to be talked about for generations to come.

“If you put it that way, then it seems to be a just cause.”

“But, it’s kind of.....”

He was right. Wasn’t the Empire the one who started the invasion? The emperor twisted the roles of the two parties around. Covering up the fact that the Empire started the aggression, and telling the vassal countries to send troops under the cause of ‘repelling the other-worldly invaders’. This was shameless... And of course, no one said it out loud.

That might be so, the Empire only had to tell the vassal countries that the ‘other-worldly invaders would not stop after invading the Empire, but the whole Falmat Continent’, they would probably send reinforcement. Simply put, the truth didn’t matter, it was the way you said it that was important.

“Your-Your Highness?!?! The feet of Arnus hill would be littered with corpses?!”

In response to Marquis Casel’s words, Emperor Molt replied loudly.

“I wish for victory, but there are no certain victories in war. Thus, the fate of an alliance army is unknown. It is unfortunate should they fall. If that happens, the Empire shall lead the coalition army in battle against the invaders.”

If the surrounding nations lose their forces at the same time, the Empire’s advantage over them shall remain.

"This is thou's plan for facing this situation. Any objections, Marquis Casel?"

The emperor made his decision.

Marquis Casel stared at the emperor with a dumbfounded expression on his face after thinking about the fates of the alliance army.

The Peace Faction could only bow their heads towards the emperor and started picking envoys to be dispatched.



The dark night sky was lit brightly by flares.

The Kodou Rino Guwaban (Alliance army) started their attack.

The bright artificial lights and flares shone on the advancing army at the feet of the hill.

In the front was heavy cavalry, ogre, goblins, giants, with other fantastical creatures right behind as they covered the entire land in their massed. They were followed by human troops holding kite shields in formation.

In the sky were people riding on some sort of birds.

Their force numbered in the hundred thousands, impossible to count.

The forward observer screamed into his radio.

"Three tenths in reserved, seven tenths attacking. Three tenths in reserved, seven tenths attacking!"

Hearing the words from the outpost, the 5th combat squad of the 502nd Division of the JSDF rushed through the trenches towards their given post and ready their guns to cover their assigned arc of fire.

The staff officer of the JSDF put a lot of effort in organizing this expedition force. They were facing enemies with great civilization difference after all. None of the JSDF members had fought with armor-donned enemies, fantasy creatures and magic that was an even bigger unknown to them.

Thus, they looked for ideas from fantasy novels and movies.

Inside the PX(Post Exchange) there were fantasy novels, manga and even movies on JSDF members who travelled back into the Warring Era.

There were even cases of JSDF members lining up in book stores in Akihabara just to purchase fantasy-related movies and anime.

The works of Director and author whose name started with M and T were gathered in order to find inspiration.

Thus, they made a decision to muster the force of three divisions from the units across the country.

The ranks of the commanders ranged from Captains to Second lieutenants, as well as non-commissioned officers above the rank of Corporal.

The reasons explained by the Prime Minister was 'in the uncharted land beyond the Gate, judging who is friend or foe needed to be ascertained by the on site commander. But, everybody knew it wasn't so simple.

The equipment of the troops deployed beyond the Gate was old. Firstly, the troops were equipped with the classic Type 64 Howa rifles. Next, the army vehicles they were assigned with were Terrain Type 74 tanks.

These equipments were retired from the frontlines after it was made obsolete by newer models.

“Let’s just clear the storage space while we are at it.”

These sarcastic words were once said by a former master sergeant. Although that was one of the reason, there were more to this.

Type 64 rifles were chosen because the Type 89 assault rifle’s 5.56mm rounds couldn’t stop the heavyweight ogres. If one were to charge the enemy with bayonets, the jagged edge would be stuck to the enemies armor when used to stab them.

Thus, after considering the possibility of abandoning the equipments during an emergency retreat, it was better to use these old-school weapons who had been gathering dust in the storage compared to the newer generation of weapons which cost a fortune to produce.

Type 64’s had standing bipods, and was aimed by using iron sights. It uses normal ammunition and was classified as ‘small arms’.

Some of them propped up the 5.56mm machine guns and loaded the ammunition belt from its clip.

The sergeant majors and commanders objected vehemently to bringing Type 62 machine gun along, questioning with pale faces whether high command was intending to kill them. It was not brought into the special region as it malfunctions frequently.

Countermeasures against the bird riders were Type 87 self-propelled AA guns ,Oerlikon 35 mm twin cannon AA system, M42 40mm AA guns (Duster), and other types of old-school AA weapons. Mechanical whirring noises sounded out as they aimed their sights at the birds.

Another flare lit up the dark sky as the enemies advanced towards the hill with quick steps.

They thumbed the safety switch on their rifle from 'safe' to 'semi'.

From the head sets in their ear, they could hear the voice of their commander.

"Don't panic...hold your fire..."

Although they were still not used to it, but it was still not their first time doing this.

The JSDF held their breaths and waited for the order as the enemy closed in on them.

It was the 3rd time the enemies attacked the place named by the locals as Arnus hill.

They had lost twice already, annihilated would be an adequate description.

This standard weapon in this world were swords, spears, bows and armor. Their strategy was to formed up in ranks and charged together. They will some time use flames or explosion as means of attack (not magical in nature), but their range was limited and quantity pitifully low, and wasn't much of a threat.

Hence, no matter how many of them they was, they were no match for the JSDF who were equipped with modern age firearms

In the movie [Kagemusha] by Director Kurosawa, there was a gruesome scene where General Takeda's cavalry had faced off General Tokugawa's musketeers in a battlefield.

The scene in front of them was just like the movie, where numerous corpses of men and horses littered the feet of the hill.

However, the enemy still advanced, determined to recapture this hill.

The JSDF held their ground and defended Arnus hill.

This is because due to the Gate was the only way their world had access to this. They won't allow the Gate to be taken in order to prevent the tragedy of the Ginza incident from happening again.

With one side's motive to take back while the other side to defend, their clash of opinions caused the third battle.

Maybe they learned from their previous two attempts, they did a night raid this time. Without the shine of the moonlight, vision would be obscured by night. People were prone to be careless and off guard at night too... That was the thinking in this world, and the idea wasn't bad too.

However, with the flare showing their every move to the enemy, their carefully laid plan had gone to waste.

"Fire!!!"

**In Tokyo and the rest of Japan, 24-hours stores were a given. With the night as bright as day, the muzzles of the guns and cannons served as a greeting from them to the other world**

## **Chapter 1**

First Lieutenant Itami Youji, 33 years old. He was an Otaku now, and would be an Otaku in the future.

Although he was an Otaku, he was not the type of Otaku that could write his own fantasy novels, draw his own manga, make his own figurines or even mess with Vocaloids. He didn't even comment on the works of other people in the online.

Itami Youji was the customer-type Otaku that only read the works of other people.

He had attended each Summer and Winter Comiket in Nakano or Akihabara during his holidays, but not once to his local shrine. The wall of his room in the dormitory still had the autograph of Rumiko Takahashi from his high school days on it.

Instead of army-related books that should be on his bookshelves, it was filled by doujinshis that took up all of the space on it, causing him to just stuff all his brand new work related books into his closet.

Due to his favouritism of interests over work, he had little passion for anything work-related. For example, should there be a scheduled exercise, he would purposely apply for a holiday on the excuse of "I have stuff to do on that day..." and escape from his responsibility.

He once said:

"I only work for my interests, so if someone asked me whether I chose my interests or work I would choose the former."

It was hard to imagine someone like him being in the Self-defence force, but he somehow enlisted successfully.

His motto in life was “Eat, sleep, play, repeat. And the life in between.” The phrase in one of his favourite manga was ‘The only time you are alive is when you are resting’, suiting a person such as him the most.

Thus, he had chosen a public high school that had low competition and had been admitted despite not studying much at all. From there, his grades only got worse as he only watched anime and read manga in the Anime and Manga Research Club in his school while occasionally lining up at the cinema on the premier of a movie.

His 3 years of high school life had only amounted to this.

In college, he had majored in a newly-established course that had little or no competition and had passed without much effort.

Although he had spent most of his college life with anime, manga, and light novels; he had never skipped or was late to classes and courses.

Thus, the lecturer’s comments for him here “Itami? Hmm, he’s an okay guy.” and gave him the grade of ‘Good’ after his 4 years in college.

“What career are you pursuing?”

When this question started to emerge among the graduating students, Itami had muttered quietly “*I don’t feel like stepping into the society like those riajuu...*” As, he knocked on the door of a local branch of the JSDF office one day

Anyone would exclaim “How the hell did he get commissioned as an officer?”

Because he lacked the mentality for national defence and passion for his job, his boss told him to 'redo your training', and sent him to a training unit famous for its tough training regimen.

Unsurprisingly, he contacted his boss and told him that he 'wants to quit'.

His boss was also troubled. There was no point encouraging him verbally, because he wouldn't have needed to go through all that trouble if it could work.

Left without a choice, he resorted to using the ultimate skill against Itami.

"If you quit now, I won't approve your year-end leave." (29<sup>th</sup>, 30<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> of December)

"Huh? Then I'll try my best."

Itami's boss, till this day still has no idea why his words were so effective against Itami.

Thus, on a certain day in summer, when Itami was hurrying towards a doujinshi event, held in a corner of the city by riding the Shimbashi Line, something unbelievable had happened.

A massive 'Gate' appeared suddenly.

From it emerged an army of fantasy monsters.

The area beyond the Gate had been named as the Special Region by the government. However, it only took Itami seconds to understand that the land beyond the Gate was an entirely different world.

Then, he remembered.

“Ugh! If this continues, the Summer Comiket will be cancelled!”

His quick-witted thinking and actions would later be published in all the major news outlets.

When Kasumigaseki and Nagata city was attacked, all the politicians and government officials ran for their lives without even understanding the situation happening around them. Because there was nobody ordering them, the JSDF troops stationed there couldn't be deployed. The south gate of Sakurada had been destroyed by the attack. With the chain of command of the police force absent, the police were unable to take effective actions.

Amidst that situation, Itami calmly grabbed a panicking policeman nearby and pointed towards the west.

“Lead the civilians towards the Imperial Palace for refuge!”

But he was answered with an “impossible!” After all, for a mere police officer's thinking, the idea of seeking refuge in the Imperial Palace was not an option he could consider.

That might be so, but the Imperial Palace was originally the Edo castle, a place built as a military structure that could hold tens of thousands of

people. When defending against the cavalries of the Middle Age, there was no better place than this.

No, they were not being sieged, so they need not hold down the fort and just let the civilians escape to the west through Hanzou gate.

Itami and the police force who lost contact with the command structure but still wanted to protect the civilians, barricaded themselves in the imperial palace with the cooperation of the refugees.

Although the security guards of the palace protested, an order from a certain 'Important Person' in the Palace was all that took to appease them.

The Edo Castle that was built by Tokugawa had never experienced a battle before. Ironically, after hundreds of years of peace, the palace finally showed its value as a fort.

After that, the first riot squad that was made up of guards of the Imperial Palace and the fourth riot squad deployed from Ichigaya autonomously started what would be known later as 'The Defensive battle of the Two Bridges'.

However, nobody would object to Itami's accomplishment that saved thousands of people a few hours prior to that. Thus, not only did Itami receive a commendation from the Minister of Defense, he was also promoted to the rank of First Lieutenant.

And thus, he won the day.

Sometime later, in the special region dispatch force camp.

It was the dawn after the third attack.

The bright sky shone on the land filled with numerous amounts of humans and fantasy beast's carcass that covered the earth.

There were even wyverns that were shot down by the AA gun's 40mm rounds.

It was said in the legends that the scales of a dragon were harder than steel itself. It seemed that the legend was true, but it couldn't withstand 40mm armour-piercing rounds raining on it.

"So a city worth of people is gone just like that?"

Itami thought while taking in the sight in front of him.

The number of enemies that attacked Ginza was around sixty thousand.

Excluding the fantasy creatures such as ogres, the number of casualties from the first attack to the third attack last night had amounted to sixty thousand. After losing a total of one hundred and twenty thousand troops, what would the enemy plan to do next?

There was no way to determine the population of this world. After all, their mission was to secure the Gate and the area surrounding it, so they didn't perform any reconnaissance yet.

Using common sense, a country or tribe losing tens of thousands of soldiers would suffer a heavy blow. There were people that looked like

children. No, they really were children, or could it be a certain race that has such characteristics?

It wasn't certain yet, but for a country to send children out into the battlefield, it was proof of their despair.

If Itami has thoughts that far, the other commanders definitely would have the same thoughts.

That there was a need to start an investigation on this world.

In order to secure a sizeable amount of territory, defend the land around the gate, and negotiate with the enemy, there was a need to gather intelligence to formulate future plans. Luckily, using the Kawasaki OH.1 helicopter, they could take aerial pictures of the land around the Gate to make a map. If a runway was built, unmanned reconnaissance drones could be deployed.

After that, investigation on human cities, population, races, industry, religion, political landscape and the culture of the people could be initiated.

How were they going to investigate?

By going there directly, of course.

"Would it really work?"

"Don't mind whether it would work or not! You're going!"

Major Higaki replied with a tired voice to his subordinate who was slow to react.

Itami tilted his head bafflingly at the words of his new boss.

He was an officer serving under the 5th combat unit, a First Lieutenant that was sort of like a burden. He wasn't that dense to not understand his reconnaissance mission, but he had no subordinates.

"Could it be that I have to go alone?"

There was no way he would be fine with that.

"I don't believe I ever said that. I'm organising six deep investigation teams. Your mission is to lead the third one to contact the residents inside your assigned zone and understand their situation. It may be important for the future actions of the JSDF, so try to get on their good side if possible."

"Hmm...If you say so..."

Thus, Itami scratched his head and became the platoon commander of the third reconnaissance platoon.

United States of America, White House

"Mr. President, here's the 6th report regarding the Gate in Tokyo."

After spreading jam and butter on a piece of toast, President Dirrell ate it before receiving the papers placed in a binder from his capable aide.

After glancing through the few pieces of papers, he placed the report on the table.

“Mr. Crealon. According to this report, the Japanese Army went through much trouble to go through the Gate, only to shut themselves behind walls around the Gate like turtles?”

“It’s as you say, Sir. The only action the JSDF has done recently is strengthening their defence, nothing more.”

The aide didn't use the term Army, but Self-Defence Force. However, the President didn't mind his aide's nonchalant correction and continued by saying.

“Hmph... an overwhelming technology gap. Superb soldiers who have undergone strict training. Just what the hell are they hesitating for? Tell me what you think.”

“Mr. President, please allow my blunt statement. Japan has learned from the World War. Although they have an overwhelming fighting power, to completely gain control over those vast areas of land, just using weapons isn't enough. What they can do now is, after completely grasping the political situations of the Special Region, and adopt the strategy of suppressing key targets.”

That could be seen if one considers the unusual number of mid-level commanders in the force deployed beyond the Gate. After completing the phase of securing the Gate, they are now deploying small squads for intelligence gathering and pacification work.

After dabbing the grease at his lips, the president glanced at his subordinate.

“In other words, the Japanese Army is investigating the situation in the Special Region right now?”

“It is as you say, Mr. President. Prime Minister Houjou seems to be a cautious man and by not rushing things, he is now taking things step by step.”

President Dirrell took a sip of his coffee.

After taking a tough stance against the Ginza Incident with an unyielding attitude, Prime Minister Houjou had gained an unexpected boost in his support and is now politically stable. Thus, there was no need to rush things as it is.

On the other hand, President Dirrell’s support has been going down the drain. He had to show significant results to his people soon, that’s how the situation was for him.

“My dear aide, the Gate is a new uncharted land.”

“So it is, Mr. President.”

“There must be countless possibilities beyond the Gate. Just imagine it.”

Untouched resources, overwhelming technological advantage, unpolluted nature. For an economy that was made up of capitalism, it was like a pot of gold.

The presence of resources was confirmed.

After analysing the equipments of the attackers of Ginza, they were all made of mineral resources similar to Earth. Not only that, it seems that the Special Region could be rich in rare minerals such as gold and diamonds.

The difference in technologies could be determined from the design and types of weapons.

Although the equipment looked like works of art at a glance, it was only at the level of handmade items. The material and built wasn't uniform, and there wasn't any set design.

After considering the equipment of the cavalries and their attack strategies, one could easily predict the society and productivity of their civilization.

On top of that was the existence of fantasy creatures, beast and demi-humans on the other side of the Gate. Their genes could be said as a revolutionary mountain of treasure for the biological researchers.

This was the Gate's worth.

This unnatural phenomenon had attracted the interests of scientists around the world.

"Don't worry, Mr. President. America is allies with Japan. With our similar values and our strong economic ties, the benefits reaped from the Special Region should be open to America. It's about time we work towards that."

"It isn't enough."

Speaking of actions, the European Union had started to react.

China, Russia, as well as other rising countries have already started to act behind the scenes for the benefits granted from the Gate.

"The problem is, to what extent we can secure our interests."

This was the result President Dirrell wanted to show to his people.

"Therefore, I think our country can participate in the action more. Considering the alliance between Japan and America, how about deploying our own army into the Gate?"

However, the aide shook his head regretfully.

"Our hands are currently full with the situation in the Middle East and we can't spare the effort."

Also, the possibilities of the Gate may not all be benefits. To tame the uneducated barbarians in the Special Region, large amounts of budget, talents and time were needed. Just like during the time the British colonized other nations, just using force was not enough.

The president sighed deeply at the annoying reality that prevented him from getting his way.

"Based on the report, the battles in the Special Region seem to be intense?"

“The number of ammunition consumption was alarming. But it seemed to be tapering down. The JSDF must have secured the Gate. After all, the difference in equipment and training is just too vast.”

“Hmph...So what shall we do?”

“It’s fine to just supply Japan with weapons and ammunition. We just need to give a heads up to the weapons’ industry. Next would be the signing an agreement to send our people in for scientific research. After that will be dependent on the situation.”

If they supported Japan too much, they may be dragged into a bad situation.

Many countries agreed that the JSDF being sent into the Special Region was for a just cause. But for a few countries such as China and South Korea criticised that Japan’s militarism had reared its head again and it is now invading others again.

No matter what Japan does, these countries would criticise its actions anyway, but he couldn’t ignore it since their denouncement was public. Should Japan decide to monopolise the profits from the Special Region, more countries with similar stance would emerge. Should such a situation emerges, America would not be safe from being called an accomplice to Japan.

“Let Japan pick the chestnut out of the fire.”

“Then execute an adequate plan when the situation calls for it.” said the aide.

However, President Dirrell still wasn't satisfied.

For now, Japan had been moving all the right pieces, not allowing America to get involved.

President Dirrell had to show some significant results for his people. However, he couldn't just ignore his aide's warnings. Clicking his tongue in annoyance, he agreed to his aide's advice and move on to the next topic requiring his attention.

The appearance of the Gate had the second largest impact in history ever since Columbus's discovery of America.

Just like the discovery of America had caused Spain to develop into an empire, the appearance of the Gate will affect the world's structure greatly. Thus, every government in the world was now keeping a close eye on what actions Japan would take regarding the Gate.

Ula Pianca (Imperial Castle)

Each day, hundreds of lords and nobles would visit the castle.

Senators, nobles, and courtiers would gather in meetings, treating politics just like any other chores.

In the meetings, they would enjoy delicious foods, graceful dancers, gambling, courting before engaging in dialogues... That was the general feel of it. The nobles might even decide the deployment of armies based on the number of games they hunted.

However, with the recent defeats haunting their minds, each of them had a grim look on their face.

The beautiful pieces of art now looked like pebbles on the road while the graceful music sounded hollow to them.

What caused the Empire to hold its dominant position among the countries when it was under the reign of Emperor Molt Sol Augustus was the overwhelming military force and immense wealth.

Even a child would know that these were the reasons that the Empire was feared by many countries.

Now, the Empire could be said to have lost an arm.

As the generals and nobles in the court were part of the expedition, there was a huge amount of casualties.

With such an outstanding amount of dead people, the nobles had to spend their day rushing around from one funeral to another.

The emperor himself hosted the ceremony with mourning clothes and the lazy days of the castle continued.

“Your Majesty, the Alliance Army has suffered a major defeat. The dead and missing have reached sixty thousand. If we include the ones who were wounded, but are still able to resume their duties, it is around a hundred thousand. The survivors of the Alliance Army have each returned to their respective countries.”

These numbers had not included the ogres, goblins and giants. The demi-humans which had inferior intelligence were treated like warhorses.

Hearing Domestic Minister Marquis Marcus's report, the emperor nodded his head tiredly.

"Just as planned. The cowardly senators who were afraid after we suffered some losses have nothing to worry about anymore."

"But, the movement of the enemies from beyond the Gate is a concern."

"Hmm, are you getting paranoid?"

"I was born with this paranoia of mine. I will never attain such magnanimity as Your Majesty."

"So be it. In that case, I shall act as to relieve the worries of my trusted retainer. This is not such a difficult problem. The distance from Alnus Hill to here is far. It will be fine to use the Empire's extensive territory as a rampart."

The emperor continued.

If the enemies started moving their pieces, all the cities and villages leading up to the Empire shall be burned down, the wells poisoned and the food seized till the last grain of wheat. Therefore, amidst the scorched earth, no army could obtain supplies and thus stop their advancement. With this, no matter how strong their army and their mages might be, a chance for them to show their weakness would arise.

If there was no way to forage supplies locally, supplies would have to be sent from their own country. It would be a heavy burden on their horses. This way, the enemy's fighting potential would be lower the closer they get to the capital, giving the Empire's army the advantage when fighting near the capital.

If they built strongholds at various locations and forced the enemies to bleed, the enemies would gradually crumble under the pressure. Such was the basis of this world's military science.

Make the enemies advance deep into the enemy's territory and hit them when they are tired. Without doubt it was an easily understandable and effective tactic in any world. However, scorched earth tactics would turn their own lands into crisp, and it would be hard to undo the damage. Such tactics disregarded the livelihoods of the people by robbing their food and water, and the support of the people would be lost. Thus, the people would have resentment towards the government that would last for generations. Considering all these cons, it was hard to issue such orders politically. However...

"But...the tax revenue would decrease."

Marquis Marcus used a reserved manner to articulate the damage that would be done to the people.

The emperor only said "Hmph. Just cancel a few planned parades and postpone the plans for the imperial villa." For the powerful Empire, the suffering of the people and the approval of the citizens were such trivial things.

"There was talk of Marquis Casel, making a fuss."

“Why do I have to care about what Marquis Casel's sanity?”

“It seems like he and some of the senators are conspiring to declare a state of emergency counsel.”

The Senate's counsel could veto the orders from the emperor. The Senate even has the power to dismiss the emperor.

In the history of the Empire, the number of cases where the thrones of emperors were threatened due to the counsel from the Senate was not low.

“Hmph, how interesting. Just let them do what they want. Who knows, this may be a chance to round up all those conspirators at the same time. Order the Privy Council to look into this matter.”

Marcus had an astonished expression on his face for a second, but he still bowed respectfully towards the emperor.

The emperor's weapon against the Senate was the crime of treason. It required the Privy Council to present evidence in order to sentence them.

“It seems like many have taken the privilege of being a Senator for granted. Looks like it's time to remove the weeds.”

Marquis Marcus bowed his head respectfully.

Suddenly, a voice that was clear as a bell cut through the quiet air in the palace.

“Your Majesty!”

The disrespectful person appearing before the emperor was the princess. In other words, one of the emperor's daughters.

She had flame-like vermillion hair and white porcelain skin that was accentuated by her white silk garment. Kneeling on one knee, she displayed flawless court etiquettes.

"What's the matter?"

"The Empire is now having an emergency. What has Your Majesty did to curb this problem? Is Your Majesty getting senile?"

Such sharp words emerged from her beautiful face.

Realising that there was another one who mistook privilege for authority, Emperor Molt smiled bitterly.

The princess's tongue was sharp as usual.

"Your Highness, what urgent matters do you have to barge into the chambers of His Majesty?"

If the emperor's third daughter, Pina Co Lada just sat still with a smile on her face, she would look just like a peerless work of art. However, her sharp tongue have been said to have made weak men faint, which was infamous in Empire.

"Obviously, it's about the bandits occupying Arnus Hill. It seems that till this day Arnus Hill is still under their control. I couldn't imagine that

your Majesty would still sit with such a relaxed posture after hearing what happened to the Allied Army. Marquis, have you reported the facts to his Majesty?"

"Your Highness, I certainly did give the report. The Alliance Army did suffer heavy losses, but they defended bravely against the enemy's invasion of the Falmat Continent. Thanks to the courageous Alliance Army who sacrificed their lives in the battle, the enemy who received both physical and psychological damage and are shivering in fear as they built strong forts in panic, hiding within like hibernating bears. Such enemies are no threat to us at all."

After hearing Marquis Marcus's words, Pina replied with a 'hmph'.

"I'm not a kid anymore, I know that how things are put across matters. But to turn an army's complete defeat into victory is unheard of for me."

"It's the truth."

"So you are going to sacrifice the truth and paint the history books with your lies?"

"Even if you put it like that, I cannot answer."

"You sly courtier! Isn't the Holy Hill of Arnus still under the enemy's complete control? They defended successfully? The truth is that the foot of the hill is filled with corpses."

"It's true that we took some losses..."

"Then, what are we going to do from now on?"

Marquis Marcus played dumb while explaining to her the projects such as recruitment of new troops and their training. Pina clicked her tongue annoyingly at Marcus's words that anyone who was army related would know of.

"How many years do you think it will take? Could you ensure that the enemies of Arnus Hill would sit quietly and wait?"

"Your Highness. I am aware of that. But currently, all we can do is to follow the steps of recruiting, training and rebuilding of the army. Even the vassal states have lost their troops. Even if another Alliance Army was formed, the time needed for it to become reality would be proportional to the national strength. Even if the other countries reconstructed their armies later than us, they will catch up sooner or later."

Hearing this, Pina exclaimed astonishingly:

"It would be impossible to defend against the invaders if we wait that long!"

Sighing, Emperor Molt held up his hand to stop their bickering.

Based on his observations, Pina had the tendency to cause unrest. Those without responsibilities were like this; always criticising but had no constructive suggestions. Even if they had made suggestions, it was all a wishful thinking that disrespected the tradition and social status of others. If someone voiced objections against them, they would counter by asking "What would you do then!"

For example, the only solution now is to follow the steps Marquis Marcus had said. Buying time for that would be dependent on diplomacy. To achieve that, the emperor's plan to gather the vassal country's troops and eliminate them in one go was successful.

The resigned emperor shrugged and said to his daughter.

"If you put it this way Pina, I have something to say."

"Yes, Your Majesty?"

"Regarding the enemies of Arnus hill, what information we have on our hands now is very limited. Why don't you go check it out?"

"Me?"

"Yes. We are still rebuilding of the Empire's army, so we are lacking scouts and can't draw them from our standing army. The enlisting and training of new recruits will need time as Marquis Marcus said. The only troops that are free and is adequately trained would be your Order of Knights. If the knights are not your playmates for pretend games, that is..."

Under the provoking gaze of the Emperor, Pina shut her lips.

The time needed to travel to Arnus Hill was ten days on horseback.

It was the dangerous frontlines, where tens of thousands of troops had perished. Now she and her Order of Knights had to rush to there by themselves...

Furthermore, it wasn't for a magnificent battle, but a simple scouting trip.

For knights, who were mocked to be playing a game of pretend, although they took pride for being assigned missions, the contents of the mission were dissatisfying.

Also, she and her order of knights had zero experience in a real battle. Could she and her knights successfully complete this dangerous mission?

The emperor's gaze carried the meaning of 'if you don't want to then shut the hell up'.

"Well then. Do you accept this order?"

Gritting her teeth, Pina raised her head with a determined look and...

"I have received it."

After she said those proud words Emperor Molt responded ceremoniously.

"Umu, then I shall look forward towards your achievements."

"Well then, Father. I shall be on my way."

With that, Pina Co Lada turned her back to the throne as she left the hall.

## Chapter 2

“The sky is so blue, as expected of a different world.”

Itami muttered to himself. Huge lumps of clouds floated in the sky, with no utility and telephone poles obscuring the view. The sky was clear no matter where he looked.

“You can see the same scenery in Hokkaido too.”

Sergeant Kurata replied from his driver’s seat. He came from the garrison in Hokkaido.

“As for me, I was hoping a place where giant trees roam, huge dragons fly, and fairies buzz around. But the Humans we saw in the village so far are all Humans and the livestock are just cattle and sheep, such a disappointment.”

Kurata had just finished his Sergeant training course and was only twenty one years old. After getting to know Itami and his casual approach to hierarchy relationships, Kurata spoke without reservations.

With the blue sky as the background, a green coloured military convoy drove through the plains in single file.

Leading the way was a Type 73 light truck, with a High Mobility Vehicle (HMV) behind it, and a Light Armour Vehicle (LAV) at the very back.

In simple words, the two in front were jeeps and the one behind was an armoured vehicle.

Itami was seated in the HMT in the middle of the convoy.

Behind him were the members of the Third Recon Platoon, under his command. Three vehicles and twelve members, that was the full strength of this platoon.

Sergeant Major Kuwahara Soichiro who was in the back seat with his map laid out leaned his face towards the driver seat.

“Hey Kurata, you should be able to see a small stream soon. Turn right and go along it, and we will hit a forest soon. That would be the forest the chief of Coda Village mentioned.”

Orientating himself by using a compass and a map made via aerial photography, Sergeant Major Kuwahara who was giving directions worked all the way up through the rank from private, and was fifty years old. He had vast experience as a trainer in the training department, and was respected and feared by recruits who addressed him as ‘Oyatsu-san’. Kurata completed his basic military training as a recruit in Sobuyama under the tutelage of Sergeant Major Kuwahara.

There were no satellites in this world, so GPS could not be used. Hence, they could only rely on maps and compasses. Only those who were experienced could handle this task, so Itami pushed the operation of the platoon onto Kuwahara.

“Lieutenant Itami, I have a suggestion. Let’s stop before the forest and set up camp there.”

Itami looked behind him to express his agreement when he heard what Kuwahara said. Kuwahara nodded in reply and picked up the handset of the radio.

Kurata checked his distance from the LAV behind him through the rear view mirror.

“Hmm, Lieutenant Itami, we are not going to drive all the way there in one shot?”

“If we go into the forest now, we will need to spend the night there right? Spending a night in a forest with who knows what creatures in it? I’ll pass on that. Even if there is a village as indicated by the intel, we would alarm them if we reached at night correct? We are the JSDF who loves peace and the citizens, how could we make such threatening moves?”

“That’s why only a small group will enter the forest.” Itami said.

The objective of the reconnaissance was to communicate with the locals and find out more about the people. It would be more convenient to travel in a helicopter, but they purposely chose to travel by land in order to interact with the natives there.

Oppressing them with violence was not their goal. They had to do what they could to avoid earning the ire of the locals. That was the directive for this operation.

They had visited three settlements so far and attempted to converse with the natives of this land. All of them said the war was the business of the lords and had nothing to do with them, and didn’t seem to express dislike or hate for Itami and the others. In that case, Itami’s group didn’t need to do unnecessary things to complicate their work.

“Eh--”

Itami took out a black cover note book from his chest pocket and flipped to the page that detailed common phrases in the local languages and started practicing. These were written by language specialists after they questioned the prisoners from the Ginza incident.

“Sabaru, haru, ugutu--? (Hello, how do you do?)”

“Utterly monotonous, shouldn’t you attend a language school first?”  
<TL: line from a commercial>

“Shut up!”

Itami knocked Kurata’s helmet.

And so, the Third Recon Platoon reached the plain before the forest. The first thing that caught their eyes were raising columns of black smoke.

“Shit’s on fire yo.”

Itami kept his eyes on the smoke in the sky and replied to Kurata “Yup, it’s all burning.” Flickers of fire could be seen in the forest.

“So this is the power of nature.”

“You mean a monster movie?”

Kuwahara handed his binoculars to Itami as he said that, and pointed slightly to the right.

Itami looked at the place Kuwahara was pointing at.

“That’s!”

A giant creature that looked like a T-rex with wings was scorching the ground with flames.

“Single headed King Ghidorah?”

Kurata retorted: “You’re outdated old pops, that’s a dragon.”

Kuwahara was from a generation who would think of Ri Sho Ryu (Bruce Lee) when he hears the term Ryu (Dragon). That was why their dialogue was out of sync.

A petite Woman Army Corps (WAC) personnel alighted from the Type 73 truck in front and jogged over.

Two WACs were assigned to this recon platoon. When interacting with the natives, it would be better for females to be present, hence their deployment. For example, in Islamic nations that were full of taboos, it would be better for women to converse with the women.

“Lieutenant Itami, what’s the matter? We can’t just stay here.”

This was Staff Sergeant Kuribayashi.

Most male JSDF would ask her if her equipment was too heavy after having seen her. She was covered in so much gear that it looked like it was moving her. However, anyone who tried to bully her because of her small stature would meet with a terrible fate. She was a warrior who held a close quarters combat badge after all.

“Do dragons have a habit of breathing fire into deserted forests?”

Even though she was queried, there was no way Kuribayashi would know the answer. But she didn’t answer “I don’t know” directly and adopted a sassy attitude.

“Lieutenant, if you are curious about the behaviour of dragons, why not have a closer look at what it is attacking?”

She asked instead.

“Kuribayashi-chan, I am scared of going alone, can you go with me?”

“I absolutely don’t want to.”

“Ah, is that so?”

Itami scratched his head hard, and then said:

“Find a suitable position to take cover and see how it goes. After the dragon leaves, we will enter the forest and render aid to any survivors.”

They had intel indicating that there was a village in the forest. That was probably what the dragon was attacking, Itami thought.

In the end, Itami's group only entered the forest the following morning.

The fire burned through the night, spewing forth smog that would hinder any reconnaissance. Thanks to the rain that fell at midnight, the forest fire finally died down and they could enter the forest.

The view inside the forest was completely clear.

The leaves were burned and the trunks of the trees were reduced to charcoal.

Wisps of smoke rose from the blackened ground.

Residual heat still remained in the ground, and they could feel the heat from the soles of their feet.

"It would be a miracle if there were any survivors."

Itami agreed with Kurata, but he still headed for the village anyway.

After a two hour hike, they finally made it to a clearing without any trees.

If the forest wasn't burned down, it would have taken at least half a day to make it here.

Surveying the area, Itami could see signs of several buildings. If he looked closely... No, he didn't need to, he could see several blackened Human-shaped objects. Instead of Human-shaped objects, it would be more appropriate to call them burned mummies.

“Lieutenant, these are...”

“Don’t say it, Kurata...”

“Bleh, I’m going to throw up.”

Kurata rubbed his abdomen as he looked around him.

Watching out for attacks, they slowly walked around the remains of the village.

All the buildings were burned. Everything above the stone floor was destroyed, reducing all of it into piles of rubbles. Blackened corpses lay under these structures.

“Master Sergeant Nishina, take Katsumoto and Tozu and search the east. Kurata, Kuribayashi; we will take the west.”

“Search? For what?”

In response to Kuribayashi’s question, Itami shrugged and answered:  
“Erm~ Survivors?”

After searching about an hour, they confirmed that there were probably no survivors in this village.

Itami wiped away his sweat as he sat beside a well. The other members were still searching through the things used by the villagers here and were wandering about.

Immediately, Kuribayashi jogged over to him with a clipboard.

“Lieutenant, there are three large buildings and twenty-nine mid-sized to small buildings in this village. We confirmed twenty seven bodies, that’s too few. Some might have been crushed by the debris when the buildings were burning.”

“Let’s say there are three people per building, there should be ninety people in this village. Including larger families, there should be about a hundred here. Were they wiped out, or hiding somewhere?”

“How brutal.”

“Yeah. I will need to report the existence of huge dragons that attack villages back to base.”

“During the Gate defensive battles there were enemy riding wyverns too. Those were much smaller than what we saw yesterday, but their scales could withstand the impact of 7.62mm rounds. We barely pierced their soft bellies with 12.7mm rounds.”

The breadth of Kuribayashi’s knowledge made Itami widen his eyes.

He had heard rumours about the collection of wyvern carcasses and the hardness tests performed on their scales, but he didn’t know about the results. Under normal conditions, 7.62mm rounds could pierce 10mm steel plates. Which meant the scales of wyverns were harder than that.

“Just like an APC.”

“That’s right.”

Itami realized he was running low on water after placing his mouth onto his bottle. After swirling it around for a moment, he looked around and realized there was a well behind him. Grabbing the bucket beside him, he prepared to lower it into the well and pull it up with the rope.

“Looks like we need to investigate where the dragon’s nest is, and its area of activity.”

Saying that, he dropped the bucket into the well.

When he did that, he heard a sharp ‘donk’.

“Hmmm?”

Normally, they should be the sound of something dropping into the water.

He was expecting a splashing sound instead, so Itami looked into the well in surprise. Kuribayashi lean forward and looked down curiously too as she mumbled “What is that?”

And then...

There was a young girl with long golden hair and a bump on her head floating in the water like a puppet with its strings cut.

“Tuka, get up quick.”

The young girl was awakened by her father from her dreams.

“Father, what is it? I was sleeping well.”

She got up and said while rubbing her eyes.

Looking around, she saw the brilliant sunlight shining into her room.

Being stirred from her afternoon nap made her dizzy. But she still noticed that the expression of her father who woke her was strange.

She could hear noise of people scampering and shouting, the village was in chaos. She understood from such an atmosphere that something big was happening.

“What is happening?”

Tuka found the answer by herself. Outside the window, the figure of a giant dragon could be seen in the sky. There weren't any dragons nesting around here, so this was the first time she had ever seen one. Of course, Tuka learned about them from her father's general lessons when she was young.

“Is that a Flame Dragon?”

“That's right.”

Her father was holding a bow, the common weapon of the Elves. And he was taking out the valuable arrows from the drawer, ones with mithril arrow head and feathers.

*Is father going to fight?*

Tuka reached for her trusted bow on reflex.

“Please don’t.”

However, her father stopped her verbally.

“Why?”

“You need to escape.”

“I want to fight too.”

“No, if anything happens to you, your mother will tell me off.”

Her father will only mention her departed mother when he absolutely needed her to listen. But the daughter who was already matured mentally rejected him with a smile.

“If the opponent is a Flame Dragon, it doesn’t matter where I run to. And it is better to have one more soldier right?”

It was said that the favourite food of the carnivorous Flame Dragons were the meat of Elves and Humans. If they don’t defeat the Flame Dragon here, it would pursue them by smell no matter where they ran. No matter how hard the earthbound Elves or Humans run, they won’t be able to escape the dragon flying in the sky.

Outside the window, the warriors were shooting their arrows into the air or summoning wind and water spirits to attack the Flame Dragon. However, they were basically ineffective.

Instead, the fire spewed by the Flame Dragon burned the people, making them scream. Women and children trying to escape were caught in the flame and reduced to a crisp.

Their death throes shot into Tuka's ears, making her furrow her brows.

"It's dangerous in here, let's move outside!"

The father grabbed Tuka's hand, while Tuka held on to her bow and arrows tightly.

Harrowing screams filled the air.

When Tuka came out from her house, she saw the girl she grew up with torn apart by the fangs of the Flame Dragon.

"Yuno!"

Her dear friend was eaten. Coming into terms with that fact, Tuka readied her bow swiftly. She might be young, but she was an Elf who was great with bow since birth, and wasn't weak.

She pulled the string with all her strength and released, but her arrow was deflected.

Aside from Tuka, the other Elven warriors fired countless arrows at the Flame Dragons, but they were all blocked by the heavy dragon scales without doing any damage.

After chewing and swallowing the Elven girl, the Flame Dragon turned its giant eyes, picking its next prey.

“Yu, Yuno she, Yuno...”

The moment the Flame Dragon looked at her, Tuka was overwhelmed with terror.

She couldn't move even though she wanted to escape, couldn't speak even though she wanted to scream. Just locking eyes with the dragon made her freeze in fear. Tuka looked as if she had lost her soul, even her will to escape was gone without a trace.

“Tuka, No!”

Her father shot his arrow as he summoned the spirits.

“Ainu, uur nya pilin o poldore varyar ilya”

With the aid of the wind spirit, the glowing arrow flew towards the eye of the Flame Dragon.

That instant, the howl of the Flame Dragon shook the air. It made all of them wonder whether the shockwave would tear all the living creatures in the surrounding apart.

“The eye! Aim for the eye!”

The warriors concentrated their arrows towards the head of the Flame Dragon. Shooting the grounded dragon was fine, but aiming for the eye of a flying dragon was difficult even for Elves who were master archers.

The Flame Dragon switched its target to the elf that hurt it.

Using giant pillars of flame, it burned the village and tore the warriors to shreds with its claws and fangs. It swiped, it stomped and it swallowed.

“Tuka, you must run!”

The father roared at his daughter. But his daughter just stood there motionlessly.

Her gentle father had never spoken so loudly before, he was just a good and meek father normally. However, during such moments of crisis... When he needed to be courageous and violent, he could do so as well.

Before his daughter was caught between the jaws of the dragon, the father tackled her away. He then picked her up and sprinted.

“Incoming!!”

Voices of the warrior mixed together just like a choir.

Some of the many arrows hit the gaps of the dragon scale, mouth and the base of the claws.

However, the dragon was fearless as its huge body descended.

The father said to his daughter.

“You must hide in here, alright?”

He then threw his daughter into the well.

The last thing she saw before she was thrown in was a giant maw and sharp claws closing onto her father’s back.

She spent a long time in the well.

The burning village and forest could be heard clearly. The ash drifted into the well along with the roars and screams of warriors.

Being submerged waist deep in the cold water made her shiver. She was afraid, tense, uneasy and her tears kept flowing out.

Before she realized it, the noise stopped.

What she could hear was her breathing and heart beating, as well as the rippling of the water. The blue sky had turned black before she knew it. But somehow, the area around the well was still brightly lit. The fire burning the village shone into the well.

She didn’t know how much time had passed when it started to rain.

Her entire body was soaked, the water drenched her face and got into her eyes. But she couldn’t move her gaze away from the sky.

“Ah Tuka, are you okay?”

Her father showed his face while saying this. She had already seen this hallucinations several times.

However, she didn't hear anyone no matter how long she waited.

The disgusting idea that everyone was already dead appeared in her mind, crushing her heart.

"Father... Save me."

The well water was cold. The chill, fatigue and hunger siphoned Tuka's strength to stand away. Despair robbed her will away.

"At this rate, I guess I am going to die?"

Tuka thought. It was unfathomable, but she wasn't afraid of death. Or maybe, it was better if she just died like this. She would be liberated from fear and unease if she died. Solitude and sadness would dissipate too. Death was the only way she would be free from all this suffering, that's how she felt.

Suddenly, she seemed to hear the voice of someone above the well.

She looked up despite her murky consciousness. Her vision was then covered completely by something that was like a wooden bucket.

A 'donk' sound.

Sharp pain similar to breathing in spice deeply through her nose filled her sight with stars.

Her consciousness drifted far away.

“Oiawmjeiofjpo aiojaioejf”

She felt her cheeks being slapped, and heard quizzing voices.

From her blurred vision, she saw someone watching at her, he looked very much like her father.

“Fa... ther...”

“It’s an elf, Lieutenant.”

Sergeant Kurata said and Itami replied “Looks like it.”

“And a blonde elf too. Ku~~~ there is hope!”

“Kurata, you find Elves moe?”

“No. If I have to pick one, I will prefer the sexy type. If there are Elves, there must be lusty witches, pure succubus, passionate vampire girls and elegant monster girls right? By the way, a naughty cute werewolf girl is fine too.”

Images of R18 doujinshi describing these girls came to Itami’s mind... But he felt a bit terrified that they really do exist.

The Beast Girls would probably look more realistic than the actress who wore make up in the musical based on a Tezuka manga. If the witches and vampires Kurata spoke of really existed, they would definitely be moe.

“Well, the chance of them existing is definitely higher now.”

“They, they definitely exist!”

Moving away from Kurata who seemed to be burning up while clenching his fist and saying “How moe!”, Itami cheered him on with “Well, good luck.” from a distance.

Kuribayashi and another WAC, Staff Sergeant Kurokawa Mari, were busy taking off the drenched clothes of the girl who appeared to be sixteen years old, and wrapping a blanket around her.

Although the men wanted to watch this scene, it was impossible with the threat of punishment from Kuribayashi’s iron fist. They couldn’t even go near.

Itami could only watch from afar as he coiled ropes up after going into the well. The water that soaked his clothes at the bottom of the well was cold, and his boots made squishing sounds because of the water in them.

The other members used their issued shovels to dig holes for the corpses, or clear the debris to collect artifacts. They gathered furniture and earthenware used in the villagers’ daily lives, and items that survived the fire such as bows and arrows. After all, taking video and

photographs were important work, they needed to bring this information back.

Itami bent over to take off his boots and turned them upside down. Water spilled out with a splash. He didn't want to wear it right away, but he couldn't walk without it. And so, he stuffed newspapers from his bag into them in order to absorb as much water as possible, then wrung the water out of his socks before putting it back on.

Moments later, Staff Sergeant Kurokawa (who was a licensed nurse) came over.

She saluted Itami, so he had to return the salute. However, Itami who was barely 170cm had to look up at Staff Sergeant Kurokawa who was 190cm tall.

Kuribayashi who used all sorts of ways to fudge past the minimum height requirement and Kurokawa was called the beanpole and shortstack WAC of 3rd recon.

"Her body temperature is back to normal. The bump on her head that looked like something out of a manga had subsided, I think she will be fine... But what do we do next? We can't stay here too long, and it would be too inhumane to leave this girl here alone."

Kurokawa said in a calm and soothing tone.

Unlike the short tempered and brash Kuribayashi, the tall Kurokawa was even mannered and quiet in contrast.

“Seems like the entire village is destroyed, and we can’t just abandon someone we saved. In order to keep her safe, we should take her with us.”

Kurokawa smiled. Itami felt that time passed slowly when he was with this lady, how unfathomable.

“I was pretty sure you would say something like that, Lieutenant.”

“You mean I am a real humanitarian, right?”

“Well, I wonder about that? I was thinking you have special taste or because that girl is an elf, Lieutenant. It would be rude for me to say more.”

Itami started sweating profusely, down his neck, into his collar and onto his clothes.

According to their schedule, they need to visit two or three more villages, but the Elven girl needed emergency medical care, so Itami planned to backtrack and return to base. After setting up the antenna to seek advice from base, he received a reply that was like ‘yeah, fine, just get on with it.’

“Sergeant Major Kuwahara... That’s how it is, I will be counting on you. Let’s head back to Kouda village.”

After Itami said that, he got onto the passenger seat of the HMV. Kurata will drive and Kuwahara will direct the entire platoon from the back seat. In order to care for the elf, Kurokawa stayed with her.

The third recon platoon set off once again.

Their trip back was peaceful too. It was hard to believe that just this morning a dragon was flying around and annihilated an entire village.

A clear sky without clouds and vast plains as far as the eyes could see.

Nearly half the day's journey was spent in the dust kicked up by the convoy. Compared to the time they came, the recon platoon was more energetic and it felt like fleeing to them.

"It would be terrible if the dragon chased after us."

"Don't say it, it might just happen."

When he heard those words from the driver's seat, Itami couldn't help retorting.

This was an unpaved road and the suspension of the vehicle couldn't absorb the shock completely, so it shook intensely.

Kurokawa took the girl's blood pressure and pulse, then asked with her head tilted.

"What's the normal blood pressure and heart rate for elves?" She asked, which left Itami dumbfounded. "Her vitals have stabilized, but they are a bit low compared to the norm for Humans." She reported.

"Is she fine?"

“Her breathing has calmed down, her blood pressure, heart rate and temperature are stable. She is not sweating unnaturally... She is fine by Human standards.”

Kurokawa, who didn't know about the biology of Elves, could only answer this way. Itami felt that contacting the locals and conversing with the elf would be the best course of action.

The villagers of Kouda welcomed Itami's group with an 'Oh, you are here again' kind of feeling. They were not hostile and just greeted them casually.

Itami looked at his dictionary as he talked to the village chief and explained the situation, how they found the village in the forest as directed, how it had been reduced to ashes by the dragon attack, e.t.c.

“What? Annihilated? That's terrible!”

Itami flipped through his tiny dictionary and chose the phrase to say.

“Also~. We went into forest. Big bird. Forest burned down. Village burned down.”

There were no appropriate words, so Itami said 'big bird' as he sketched the picture of a dragon on his notebook. Itami was good at making such illustrations.

The chief's face turned pale when he saw the sketch.

“This, this is a dragon, and a Flame Dragon on top of that!”

Itami's vocabulary increased with these new words. He wrote down the words for dragon in romaji.

"Dragon, breath fire. Humans, many burned."

"Not Humans, you mean Elves. Those living there are Elves."

Using the language of this world, the chief repeated 're-namu' several times. Itami wrote down on his dictionary under the 'E' pages and wrote 'Elf/ Re-namu'.

"Yes. Elves there. Many died."

"We are very grateful you told us this. We have to alert the villages nearby. Dragons who know the taste of Elves and Humans will attack villages and towns when they get hungry."

To express his gratitude, the chief Shook Itami's hand, and shouted to his family and the people around him.

When they learned that a dragon attacked an Elven village, the face of the villagers turned pale and they ran off.

"One person, girl saved."

Itami's words made the chief raised his head with an 'Oh'. The chief was then led to the back compartment of the HMTV to show him the unconscious blonde girl.

"How tragic. This child is left all alone, Everyone she knew is gone."

The chief stroked the blonde locks of the Elven girl. Their culture might be different, but Kouda village had some interaction with the Elven village.

The Elves watch over the forest, stopping the hunters from wandering into its depths. They would also help the hunters when they were lost or injured, even going as far as to escort them home.

Not meddling with each other's affairs and staying away from each other. But in a way, they respected each other.

"Erm~... This one, village take care...?"

The chief understood what Itami was saying, but he shook his head.

"Our race and culture are different. You should entrust her with an Elven village. And besides, we must flee from here."

"Village, abandon?"

"We are escaping. If you didn't inform us, the entire village would be destroyed. We are very grateful."

### **Chapter 3**

There was a small patch of trees located some distance from Coda Village, and within those trees was a small house.

The house was roughly the size of two six-tatami rooms. There were two small windows in its walls which were designed to allow the maximum amount of light and wind into the house, due to the lack of glass in this world.

Its walls were made of sun-dried bricks laid on top of each other, and was covered in ivy vines.

The light that filtered through the arching canopy above them warmed the surrounding air causing the house to have an elegant feel to it.

Someone had parked a wagon in front of the house. The bed was buckling under the weight of a small mountain of crates, sacks, and books tied together with twine.

After looking at the amount of luggage on the wagon and the donkey grazing beside the road, one might ask if this was too much for one poor beast to draw.

In front of this heap stood an obviously troubled person, clutching a bundle of books.

She was a girl with silver hair, and looked to be around 14 or 15 years of age. She was wearing a kantoi.

(TL Note: A Kantoi is something between a poncho and a robe.

<https://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E8%B2%AB%E9%A0%AD%E8%A1%A3>)

“Master, we can’t keep piling things onto the wagon.”

No matter what they did, they simply could not cram anything else onto the wagon. The girl calmly related this fact to the person inside the house.

“Lelei! Can’t you think of something?”

A snowy-bearded old man poked his head out from a nearby window, with a “I can’t take this” expression on his wrinkled face.

“It would make more sense to leave the Coam fruits and the Lochte pears behind.”

The girl called Lelei removed the sacks full of ripe fruits from the wagon one after the other. She placed the book bundle she was holding into the space that was freed up.

Coam fruits and Lochte Pears were herbal medicines that were very effective against high fevers. However, these fevers were rare, and so they were not particularly necessary in the short term. And while they were rare, they were not unobtainable by any stretch, so the precious books she had just loaded up took priority over them.

The white-haired old man sagged his shoulders.

“The Flame Dragon shouldn’t have woken up for another 50 years, why now...”

The news of the Flame Dragon’s attack on the elf village had spread like wildfire.

Normally, they would have dropped everything and fled, but since they had warning in advance, there was still some time to pack. As a result, the village was filled with activity as everyone made their preparations to escape.

The old man grumbled and carried the sacks which Lelei had taken off the wagon back into the small house. There was a secret door under the bed where he planned to hiding them .

In the meantime, Lelei guided the donkey over and hitched it to the wagon.

“Master, you’d best mount up quickly.”

“Ah? What are you saying? I’m not interested in mounting a little girl like you. Your big sister would be much better... Oh yes, your big and bouncy sister...”

“...”

Lelei glared at the old man with the coldest look she could muster. Then she proceeded to solidify the air into a lump and launched it at him. The solidified air was still only about as hard as a rubber ball, but it still hurt when it hit someone.

“Hey! Stop it! Magic is not a toy! Magic is not to be used for personal gain or enjoyment... Hey!”

“...”

“Although there’s still some time, we can’t play around like this. Let’s move out soon.”

“I got it, I got it, no need to rush... you really can’t take a joke, can you?”

The old man gripped his staff in one hand and settled into the seat next to Lelei. Lelei, on the other hand, glared at the old man and spoke.

“Jokes are meant for entertainment between friends, parents, lovers and other closely related people. However, once they start taking on a sexual nature, one must start taking the other party into consideration as well. For instance, it would be completely unacceptable to start making lewd jokes around a teenage girl. This might well irreparably damage the relationship with them. I believe this should be common knowledge for mature individuals, no?”

The old man sighed deeply as his disciple lectured him.

“Huu... I’m so tired. I wish I didn’t have to get old.”

“Objectively speaking, that is incorrect. I feel that Master is as hardy as a cockroach.”

“Now that’s what I call rude. Is that how a disciple should be speaking?”

“This is how I was raised from childhood, and I was raised by my Master.”

After her unreserved words, Lelei lightly struck the donkey with her riding crop.

The donkey obediently tried to move forward, but it could not, because the wagon’s bed was overloaded.

“ ... ”

“...Like I said, we’re carrying too much.”

“That was expected. Also, you were the one who said we could keep piling things on, Master.”

“ ... ”

Lelei quietly jumped off the wagon.

She felt that it would be better to keep walking than sit still on an immobilized vehicle.

“Oi, oi! Lelei, you need to be more patient! If you’re like that, nobody will want to marry you, and that would be a shame!”

As the old man said that, he took up the goad and struck the donkey. The donkey tried its best, but as expected, the wagon refused to budge.

Lelei noticed that one of the wheels was embedded into the ground, about a third of the way in. If it was stuck like that, it was only natural that the wagon could not move.

“Master, I think you need to get off the wagon.”

“Don’t, don’t worry. After all, don’t we have this?”

The old man raised his staff, and Lelei sighed. Mimicking the tone of her master, she replied:

“Magic is not a toy. Magic is not to be used for personal gain or enjoyment...”

Sweat poured like a waterfall from the old man’s forehead, and he rushed to answer her.

“We are magicians, we do not walk like the rest of Humanity.”

However, he could not defy Lelei’s glare, which was utterly devoid of warmth or compassion.

The old man’s mouth opened up as if he were going “ah~”, and he began chanting the words he had not spoken for a long time.

“...”

His solemnity as an educator clashed with the other feelings in his heart. It would seem the old man’s next move would take some time. After a while, he looked at Lelei with an uncomfortable expression on his face.

“I... I’m sorry.”

“That’s fine. After all, I know that’s how Master is.”

Lelei was a child who did not sugarcoat her words.

After using magic to lighten the weight of the luggage, the donkey could easily pull the wagon and its mountain of cargo. And so, Lelei and her Master sat on the wagon and left the home they had occupied for many years.

As they drove the wagon to the center of the village, Lelei noticed many families with wagons full of things, much like herself and her Master. It wasn't just wagons they used, but haywains and plow harnesses, and some people had even loaded up their horses with saddlebags.

Lelei looked closely at the other villagers, as if she were studying them.

Her Master spoke.

"You're an intelligent child. Everyone else must look foolish to your eyes."

"It's only natural that Humans would flee with everything they could carry once they heard of the Flame Dragon's approach."

"You said it was natural for Humans... does that mean they're foolish, then?"

"..."

Lelei could not deny her Master's words.

If they really valued their own lives, they would immediately drop everything and run as far as they could. Stopping to take on and secure luggage would only waste time that could be spent on fleeing, and the luggage itself would slow them down. It would be too late to abandon it when the Flame Dragon came.

To begin with, why did humans even struggle so hard to survive? Death was inevitable -- it would happen sooner or later. What was the point in slightly prolonging one's life?

Lelei logically dissected the topic as she considered it, and the old man was agonizing over how to speak with her.

When they reached the center of the village, the way forward was blocked by a line of wagons.

"What's happening up ahead?"

The column of wagons did not move, but Lelei's Master received a reply from someone in front.

"Ah, it's Kato-sensei. And Lelei too. Ah, we're in trouble now. Someone overloaded their wagon and the axle broke, and now it's stuck in the middle of the road and blocking everyone. We're all pitching in, but it'll be a while.

They would be bogged down by the wagons behind them even if they wanted to turn around and take another route. This was what some might call a Catch-22.

As her Master was talking to the villager, Lelei's attention was drawn by a group of mysterious men, who spoke a language she had never heard before.

"Disaster relief is part of our job too. Start by towing away the affected wagon! Itami-taichou, please ask the village chief for permission to begin operations, and Tozu, you tell the people behind that there's been an accident and to take another route! Language? Use body language! Kurokawa, go make sure nobody's hurt up ahead."

At a glance, these men were all dressed in green... Well, green and some other colors, like brown.

No, it looked like there was also a woman among them. They seemed to be wearing helmets; were they soldiers from somewhere? However, they didn't wear armor. It would seem they belonged to a group that Lelei did not know of.

Although she wasn't quite sure what they were saying, the men and the woman leapt into action under the orders of a roughly 45-year old man.

From the look of things, he seemed to be their commander. They felt like some sort of military organization, the kind that contained their violence with rules and regulations.

She told her Master that she was going to "check things out", and got off the wagon.

The wagon that was the cause of this incident was roughly fifteen wagons ahead.

One of its axles was snapped, and the wagon lay sprawled across the road. She could see scattered luggage, a fallen man, as well as a mother with her child. The horse was collapsed on the road, its mouth dripping with foam. It flailed its limbs as it struggled to get up, so the villagers who wanted to help it stand up were unable to approach.

"You, very dangerous, faster get back."

It was one of the men in green.

His words were unclear, but judging by his gestures, he must have wanted her to keep back.

However, Lelei realized the fallen mother and child were injured. She brushed aside the man and continued on, ignoring the flailing horse beside her.

“Still alive.”

The boy was a little younger than Lelei, about ten years old. After giving her a quick once-over, she found that he had struck his head, and his face and limbs were gradually turning pale. His sweat was flowing like a squeezed rag, and his body was rapidly cooling.

The mother was unconscious, but her condition was stable. The child was the one in danger.

“Lelei! What are you doing? What happened?”

She turned back and saw that the village chief was shouting at her. Beside him was a man in green. He must have gone to inform the chief about this.

“Chief, I think the cause was overloading of the wagon and rot in the axle. The child is in great danger but his parents should be fine. The horse is beyond help.”

“Is Kato-sensei nearby?”

“He’s worrying his head off in the wagons behind. He let me come here to take a look.”

As she spoke, the woman in green began her triage of the child Lelei had looked at. Her technique suggested that she had been medically trained. The man in green beside the chief, roughly thirty years old, began signalling to his team.

Suddenly a cry rang out.

“Danger!”

“!”

The sound of an explosion followed shortly, and when Lelei looked back, the thrashing horse lay motionless on the ground. It had missed her by a hair's breadth, but if it had come any closer, the full weight of the horse -- ten times that of a man -- would have fallen on top of Lelei.

All Lelei knew was that the men in green had done something to the frenzied horse, and that it had saved her.

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The allied armies, gathered under the Empire's banner, vanished in the span of one night.

If this were in Japan, it would have been the headline of every single newspaper or scrolling across electronic signs in the shopping districts. But in this world, to the residents of the Special District, the movements of the army were unknown to them. Even if they lost the war, they would simply exchange one set of rulers for another, and it would not affect their daily lives much.

The reason why this was the case was because this country was contested territory. Sometimes one party would take it, and sometimes another party would conquer it. Since their rulers changed so often, it was impossible for the people to feel any loyalty towards them.

In this world, as long as one's home was not a battlefield, and one's families were not conscripted to fight on the battlefield, the common folk would care nothing about their country.

Even so, the people's lives had been affected.

The recent rampancy of bandits was the cause.

This world was ruled by soldiers and knights, but none of them acted to suppress banditry. This was because the obligations of nobles and their knights did not extend to maintaining order.

All they cared about was “control”. In truth, the nobles were no different from the bandits. The former robbed the peasants and called it “taxes”, while the latter used no such pretense. Both sides refused to accept any form of remonstrance and responded to any refusals to pay with brute force.

Even when the nobles or knights rode out to hunt down bandits, they were like shepherds driving off wolves, which meant that they would stop once the bandits vanished from their sight. Frankly speaking, any good they did was merely a side effect..

Since desperate bandits fought harder than normal and might even manage to kill them by luck, nobles and their troops were not too fired up about cornering and finishing off bandits. That opinion was hardly rare. Even in Japan, there was a movie about seven samurai hired by the villagers to defend them from the rampant bandits, while the lord of the land did nothing to help.

That being said, the bandits preferred it when there were fewer nobles and knights around.

Until recently, they had to skulk around in the shadows, but now they could move around freely.

An intelligent hunter would consider that killing all the prey would leave none for the future. Fortunately, or unfortunately, an intelligent person would not have become a bandit, and so most bandits were cruel and ruthless in the extreme.

For instance, there was a family who fled their village as they received news that a dragon had been spotted in the vicinity.

The father drove his wagon with his plowhorse, and on that wagon were all the family’s possessions, his 32 year-old wife and his 15 year-old daughter.

The villagers all fled as if they were grazing animals. However, unlike wild herbivores such as buffalos or zebras, this family did not move in a group. There was no time for that, not when a dragon could attack at any moment.

So they ignored their villagers' cries for them to stop, and left the village on their own.

On their second night, they ran into a group of bandits.

The man desperately spurred his horse, but there was no way for the overburdened wagon and horse to move quickly. With no way to resist, the family was captured by the mounted bandits.

The man was slain instantly, and his wife and daughter were taken away.

In the darkness, over a dozen bandits gathered around a campfire and gleefully rummaged through their spoils.

Their prey had not just been carrying coins and currency, but provisions as well. They filled their bellies with the food they had captured. They took turns raping the mother and daughter, but the more important bandits had already satiated their bestial lusts and were relaxing with wine.

"Boss! Coda Village is about to make a move!"

Ever since the Flame Dragon appeared, scores of villagers had fled. Laden down with luggage, they could not move fast, nor could they fight back. Why not attack them? There was no reason not to do so. They would slaughter and pillage them.

After hearing his minion speak, the boss laughed in satisfaction. It was a good idea, so they should go ahead and do it. But as he thought about it...

“We don’t have enough people.”

It would be asking too much of his band of twenty-odd men to take on an entire village at once.

“About that, why don’t we get guys from around the area? That way, we can work together to bring in the biggest haul ever.”

This was also a good chance to recruit more hands.

With enough people, they could successfully attack entire villages, and even towns. If he played his cards right, he -- cast out by his lord -- might even aspire to become a lord himself.

From a bandit to a lord. The sweet dream of going from a wretched little thief to the ruler of his own domain filled his mind.

This nameless bandit chief’s final moments were spent imagining a time when he would be happiest. Was that a good thing, or a bad thing?

Either way, his head fell from his neck, with a curiously comical “goro” sound.

It rolled across the ground and into the campfire.

The stench of burning hair and scorched flesh instantly filled the campsite.

Biologically speaking, a severed head could retain consciousness for several seconds. That being the case, the chief would have experienced his head falling to the ground. His field of view would have rolled with

him, and before he realised what was going on, he would have seen what used to be his body spurting blood .

After that, in his rapidly blackening field of view, he would have seen the black-haired goddess of death bathing in his fresh blood.

The first thing anyone would think when they saw the girl was “black”.

Her skin was so pale it was nearly transparent, her hair and clothes were black, and her eyes were bottomless pools of obsidian.

The bandit chief’s severed head flew with a “pyun”.

She held a heavy halberd in her hands.

It was a weapon that looked like someone had attached a heavy, slablike axe blade to a long shaft. It wasn’t something a fragile little girl could swing like a matchstick. Nor was it something a girl in black lace should be wielding. That she could use such a weapon with her delicate, slender arms and her thin little fingers, as pale as white jade, was far beyond anyone’s ability to imagine.

She rested the halberd over her shoulders, and exhaled loudly.

The girl was surrounded by the scattered corpses of the bandits.

“Well, that was fun. Ojii-san-tachi, thank you for tonight.”

She grasped the hem of her skirt and curtsyed elegantly.

At a glance, she looked to be around 13, and judging by her beauty and refined movements, she seemed to be a very well-bred girl. She had a brilliant smile on her face, but that smile did not reach her eyes. Her black pupils were filled with a hungry darkness, like a fathomless abyss.

"Thank you for offering your lives to me. I thank you on behalf of my god. My god is very pleased with your gift, and he says that I should enjoy myself with you."

"...What! What the hell are you!"

Among the surviving bandits, one of them managed to shout with far more courage than he felt, although his bowels were frozen with fear. He deserved praise for still being able to speak despite the present circumstances.

"Me?"

She smiled adorably.

"I am Rory Mercury. Apostle of Emroy, God of Darkness."

"I-is that the formal wear of the priestesses of the Temple of Emroy? One, one of the Twelve Apostles, Rory the Reaper?!"

"Ara~ you knew? Mhmh~ correct."

In the face of the laughing girl, the bandits scattered like leaves.

They left everything behind and fled with all their might, driven by their fear of death.

"What, what the hell, how can we fight an Apostle!"

"Oh, no. No no no no no. You can't run away."

Rory jumped, carrying the heavy slab of metal that seemed to weigh several times more than her. She pursued the fleeing bandits like a ferocious carnivore hunting down its prey.

The halberd cleaved through the bandits' heads like she was splitting watermelons at the beach, and the surrounding area was strewn with chunks of flesh.

"Ueh, abbah... aiiiiieee!"

Rory towered over of the fallen man. She swung her halberd lightly, sweeping it behind her legs before she raised it high above her head.

Her snow-white skin was dyed red by sprays of blood.

"Ufufu... God-sama said so, you know. The goal of all life is death. No Human can escape it."

A pitiful scream rang out just as the halberd swung down.

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"Haa... haa... haa... why, what is an Apostle of Emroy doing here?!"

The man cursed his misfortune as he ran with all his strength.

A pitiful scream rang out from the distance. Rory the Reaper had claimed another soul.

"Damn, damn it!"

There were no paths in the wilderness at night. The countryside was littered with swamps, rock formations, thorny thickets and trees. The man stumbled occasionally, his body was covered in mud and sweat, and his clothes were torn.

Once more, a howl rang out from in front of him.

He slipped on a patch of mud.

His body slid across the floor, and he bashed his head against the ground.

“Dammit, dammit, dammmiiiiit, why is my luck so damn bad!”

“Ara~ weren’t you having fun?”

There was the sound of footsteps.

Upon hearing the clear, bell-like voice, he desperately looked up. The black-clad girl towered over him, backlit by the silver disc of the moon.

“Weren’t you having fun just now? Didn’t you kill people?”

She planted the pointed tip of her axe between the man’s spread legs, a hair away from his groin.

“Aiiieeee! I, I, I’ve never killed anyone!”

“Ara, really now?”

“It’s true! This was the first job I did since I joined! The women too, they said I had to wait till the end since I was the new guy! I didn’t even lay a finger on them!”

“Hmmmmmm?”

Rory thought briefly about this before speaking to the man again.

“The other jii-sans have all been called to be with Emroy. Don’t you feel lonely by yourself?”

The man shook his head desperately. He was not lonely, not lonely at all.

“However, won’t it be sad if you’re the only one left out?”

"No, please, I would really like to be left out!" the man begged.

Rory looked at him with a cold gaze that was as sharp as a knife.

"What should I do with you, then~"

As she said that, Rory clapped her hands together.

"I've got it, this should be a good idea. Since you haven't done anything yet, why not start now?"

With that, the black-clad girl grabbed one of the man's legs.

He could feel an unimaginable strength that belied her delicate appearance.

"Ru run ra~" she hummed to herself, as she dragged the man like a mop.

"It hurts! Please stop! Gwaahhhh!"

The wilderness here was filled with rocks and sand. They tore the man's clothes to shreds as he was dragged across them, and then rubbed his sweaty skin raw. Soon his body was covered in his own blood.

"Who did you like more between the mother and the daughter?"

"Noooo! Please stop! Gueeehhh..."

"Don't stand on ceremony, this is the end for you, anyway. I'll ask nicely so you can do them."

Rory grabbed the man's leg and tossed him.

He landed in a ragged heap beside the mother and daughter.

“Well, go ahead then. It’s your turn.”

The man frantically shook his head.

The legs of the naked women remained spread, a hollow testimony to their violation. Their arms were raised, as though hailing the Emperor.

Neither of them were moving. By the looks of things, they had stopped breathing.

“Ara~ what a bother. The two of them have passed on.”

It would seem they had been raped to death.

“So sorry, we didn’t make it in time.”

Rory closed their unblinking eyes and lowered her head. Then she smiled to the man.

“Still, since they’re like this, why not do them anyway?”

Dampness spread through the man’s crotch, and a puddle of liquid formed below him.

## **Chapter 4**

The bandit youth pleaded for forgiveness.

He was prostrating on the ground as if in prayer. His face was covered in tears and snot, groveling for Rory to show mercy. He claimed that he had not committed any sins directly, that his hands were still clean. He had no choice but to resort to banditry in order to survive. He had

reflected on his actions and turned over a new leaf, that he would work seriously and so on.

Rory sighed as she watched his pitiful appearance.

She averted her face in disgust as if she had seen something dirty. She felt that she was going to be tainted by his filth if she looked any longer.

There was one major condition when killing others. The way Rory saw it, there wasn't any sin in killing people. The important thing was why; what was the intention and their attitude when doing so.

That was the teaching of the god Rory served.

What was wrong with thieves and bandits robbing others?

What sins did soldiers and executioners have for killing enemies and death row prisoners?

That was how she saw it.

The god Rory served didn't differentiate between good and evil.

She tolerated all kinds of people, respecting the careers they chose in order to live, and respecting the path they had to travel. Therefore, a bandit just needed to act like a bandit.

If this man could look into Rory's eyes proudly like a bandit, Rory would show him the appropriate respect. As an apostle of her god, she might even love him for that.

However, what was with this man's attitude?

First of all, the excuse of saying his hands were still clean was unforgivable. The moment he became a bandit, he became a member of

a group that relied on numbers and violence. It had nothing to do with him taking part directly or not.

And it was inexcusable to resort to banditry simply because of poverty. If he couldn't get food, he should just lie down and die.

Those who lacked ability and didn't have the luck to fill their stomachs could choose to live on as beggars. Rory liked and respected the tenacity of such people.

Stupid as a human, despicable as a man. There was no value in his existence. The man's ugliness made the apostle of darkness twist her beautiful face into a scowl.

Rory issued her command coldly. He was to dig three graves.

The youth answered that he had no tools, but Rory replied that he had the pair of hands given to him by his parents. And so, the youth started digging graves in the wilderness.

Unlike sand pits or farmlands, digging a hole in the wild wasn't easy. His fingernails peeled off and his skin was torn, but whenever the youth wanted to stop because of the pain, the giant halberd would slam into the ground, inches away from cutting off his fingers.

Driven by terror, the youth forgot all about the pain from the moment before, digging with all his might into the ground covered by rocks and grass.

Shortly after, he buried the father of the family.

Then the mother.

And lastly, the daughter.

When he started using his numb hands to cover the grave of the young girl with mud, the sun started rising, lighting up the surroundings.

The man did all that because that was the condition for him to be released. No, that was just what he believed. The man turned back to seek Rory's opinion.

"Is, is this okay?"

With thirst, hunger, fatigue and the pain in his hands, the man who was about to faint saw it.

He saw the girl clasping her hands in prayer-- the figure of Rory.

Kneeling down on one knee, she clasped her hand in devoted prayer. Basked in mysterious sunlight, she looked beautiful and noble, stealing the breath away from all who saw her.

Her dark flowing dress was like an attire for funerals, and her hair was black and long.

White porcelain skin.

Her lips, which looked as if they were painted scarlet with blood, formed a smile.

The girl stood up after finishing her prayer and lifted her halberd up high. She swung the symbol of her faith and her god's love down at the man who didn't even have time to turn around.

◆◆◆

The Elf who lived in Koan forest, Tuka, the eldest daughter of Hodor Ray Marceau, still thought she was dreaming.

With her eyes which were blurred as if they were covered by a veil, she could see humans rushing about.

Did something happen? Her mind wasn't working properly, only allowing her to watch and listen without any introspection.

The clouds in the sky and the scenery before her eyes flashed by from time to time. Stopping and starting every once and awhile, rocking her body with the movement.

She appeared to be in something similar to a carriage.

It started moving and stopped, and moved and stopped, over and over again.

What she saw from the windows of the carriage were the tired figures of the people carrying luggage, as if they were running away from something.

The carriage laden with luggage creaked as it advanced.

It started moving but stopped moments later.

The cloth covering the dim carriage was parted, allowing the light from outside to shine in.

*How bright...*

Suddenly, her vision was blocked by a black figure.

"Dou? Onnanoko no yousuha?"

There was someone conversing just out of her line of sight, but she couldn't understand what she was hearing.

"Kuro-chan~, how's the girl doing?"

“Lieutenant Itami... She is gradually regaining her consciousness. She can open her eyes slightly now.”

Their conversation was nothing but meaningless noise to Tuka.

A highly skilled sculptor focused his strongest passion and moe spirit in order to create a beautiful girl with perfect skin. Right now, the girl was lying powerlessly on her side. Between her golden locks was her slightly opened blue eyes which were just like gems.

Itami looked at the Elven girl as he considered his problems.

Her fever had subsided. He wasn't sure about her vitals, but they remained stable so she was probably fine, at least that's what Kurokawa said. However, they couldn't leave her alone yet.

“The trek of refugees is slow and not making progress, more and more problems keep occurring and the number of injured and drop outs keep increasing. This escape is slowly exhausting them.”

He was just venting his complains. For Itami whose motto was ‘Eat, sleep, play, repeat, life is everything in between’, this seemingly unending trek was just suffering.

The villagers wore depressed expressions. They felt fatigue in their bones, hunger in their stomachs and thirst in their throats. The piercing wails of babies abandoned by their escaping parents permeated the air. People bleeding from accidents on the road. The sun glared heavily on their backs only adding to their struggle. The worst part for the villagers, however, was all the mud. Mud which coated the ground and caked their pants and shoes which they had no time to shake off.

There was a carriage that couldn't move because the road had turned into mush, so the family sat beside it. However, even if they wanted to, the villagers couldn't offer them a hand. They could only abandon the

dropouts with blank faces. They didn't have the will or energy to spare. The father carried his child, pleading with the passing carriages to at least save his baby.

Dropping out from the caravan meant death. They lacked food or water for subsistence, and would most likely fall victim to wild beasts and bandits.

It was natural to abandon. It was natural to be abandoned. This was the line between life and death, the law of nature.

*Someone please help.*

Such prayers were meaningless.

*Someone please help.*

The gods would not offer salvation. They would not come to help, and would simply stand there and watch from above.

*Someone... Someone please help.*

Like tyrants, the gods ordered them to die.

That was why the only ones who could save men were other men.

The men wearing green gathered before the immobile carriage. If it was just the wheels stuck in the mud, they could still help.

"Alright, we are going to push!"

"Give it all you have got, show me what you're made of!!"

On command, the team pushed on the carriage with all their strength. After recovering the carriage stuck in the mud, the men didn't even wait

to receive thanks before returning to their amazing carriage that was not pulled by horses.

The villagers wondered just who they were.

They were not soldiers of this nation or the residents of this village.

They informed the village about the impending danger and then immediately offered their aid. Rather than simply being generous, these foreign people wore unbelievable smiles and were overly kind. This impression was left in the heart of all the villagers.

But when a carriage couldn't bear the load and broke down, they became cold-hearted.

The men in green and the village chief approached the villagers standing stunned before their luggage.

Next, the chief would convince them to take only the luggage they could carry on them. The villagers never considered abandoning their luggage. It was the food they lived off and their wealth. How would they survive if they lose these? But the chief still made them abandon their luggage, and in order to remove their hesitation, the men in green suggested burning the luggage. With their belongings burned, they had no choice but to go on. What about tomorrow? The day after tomorrow? With no hope in sight, they could only take one step at a time in tears.

The group was divided into those in wagons and those walking. With time, the wagon group gradually grew smaller.

Kurokawas asked Itami, "Why are we setting fires?"

"They won't be able to let go of their belongings while they are right before their eyes. This is the only way."

"Can't we request additional transport?"

With the transport capability of the JSDF, they could easily move this amount of cargo.

But Itami just scratched his head with a troubled face.

“First, we are behind enemy lines here. They might be ignoring us because of our small numbers, but the enemy will definitely react if we send a large unit deep into their territory. Accidental engagement, unplanned expansion of our front line, and committing our forces are exactly what we want to avoid. The sudden escalation of war could drag the villagers into all this... Just thinking about that makes my head itch.”

Kurokawa smiled wryly in response to Itami’s words.

“That’s why, all we can do right now is give a helping hand.”

Kurokawa had no choice but to nod in agreement.

When the refugees from Koda village reached this area, the sun was at its peak.

Leading the wagon train was the HMMV of the third recon platoon. However, it was moving at a walking pace, since the villagers behind were on foot, along with mules and farm horses pulling the wagons. Maybe walking would be even faster than this.

“But... Can’t we go any faster?”

Sergeant Kurata complained.

“I haven’t driven this slowly since driving school.”

If he pressed too hard on the accelerator, he would leave the wagon train behind. Kurata moved by using the inertia of the auto gear, simply holding the steering wheel without stepping on the pedal.

Reflected in the rear view mirror was a child grabbing the driver seat from behind and looking to the front. The HMMV was full of children and the injured who couldn't walk anymore. It was the same for the type 73 truck behind, its bench was filled with casualties and pregnant women. Of course, the dangerous weapons, ammunitions and food had all been shifted to the HMMV.

Itami studied the terrain map made from aerial photographs, watching the horizon with his binoculars. He compared the terrain with his current position, calculating the distance they had travelled and how much further they had to go. He recorded road conditions and their steepness. These were not the only things he wrote down as the flow of rivers and vegetation were also important information.

"That's weird, ravens are circling around there."

After answering 'You're right.' to Kurata casually, Itami looked forward with his binoculars again. He then discovered a girl squatting by the side of the road, surrounded by ravens.

"A Goth Loli?"

That's a costume he often saw during events and in areas such as Harajuku. There were many differing views on what was Goth, but Itami was certain the clothing fashion style of the girl was that of a Goth Loli.

She was between twelve to fourteen years old. She looked very attractive, a real beauty.

A girl like that was squatting at the side of an empty road, her black jewel like eyes staring this way without even blinking.

"Woah, a life size ball-jointed doll?"

Kurata commented after watching through his binoculars.

That girl was like an inorganic doll with no seams.

No matter how much he wanted, Kurata couldn't just drive off to look at that girl. The wagon train from Koda was advancing as slowly as the entrance to a doujinshi convention, the second hand of the clock would turn five rounds before the HMV reach that girl.

Itami decided to send Katsumoto and Furuta to go ahead on foot to check her out.

Judging from her dress, she looked more like some Japanese girl kidnapped during the Ginza incident than a native here.

When Katsumoto and Furuta tried to converse with her, they seemed unable to communicate. The squatting girl looked like a runaway ignoring the questions of two rookie cops.

When the wagon train reached the girl, she stood up as if she had been kept waiting, dusting off the dirt on her dress, easily picking up her huge halberd and walking alongside the HMV.

"Hey, where did you come from, and where are you going?"

The girl was speaking the local language.

Itami and the others couldn't converse fluently with her. They could only squeeze out a few sentences after flipping through their book of phrases which took the place of a dictionary. Katsumoto and Furuta shrugged and kept walking.

The one filling in the gaps in their conversation was a boy about seven who was sitting in the tiny space between Kurata and Itami.

"We are from Coda Village, Onee-san."

“Hmm~? What about these people in the strange outfits?”

“I don’t really know, but they are nice people helping us.”

The girl walked a circle around the HMV that was moving at walking pace.

“So they are not forcing you to go along?”

“No, a Flame Dragon came and they’re helping us escape.”

Itami’s group simply listened with an uncertain expression, exhibiting typical Japanese behaviour.

Itami sent Furuta and Katsumoto to take care of the villagers at the back, deciding to question the girl himself. He checked his phrase book, and waited for the dialogue between the boy and the girl to stop before asking.

“I wonder how this thing moves?”

“I’d like to know as well. But I don’t understand what they are saying... But riding in it feels much better than a carriage!”

“So~ riding in it feels good?”

Before he could even stop her, the Goth Loli boarded the HMV from Itami’s passenger side. She strode over Itami’s knees. There were no doors, so she entered easily.

The HMV could seat ten adults.

The seats at the front faced forward, while the back seat faced the center. There was enough space to store equipment in the center. If they could ignore traffic rules like now, it was possible to load twenty children in.

However, there were already plenty of luggage, children and elderly on the vehicle, it was as packed as a train during the morning rush hour. The girl who entered while saying 'excuse me' wasn't welcomed by the villagers. They didn't state their reluctance openly, but still showed a troubled expression.

"Hey, it's cramped, Onee-san."

"Ah~ wait a moment."

It was already a tight fit, and on top of that, she brought something so long in with her.

The halberd was long and heavy. No matter how she positioned it, the halberd would touch someone's head or face causing them to shrink away because it was cramped inside the HMV. As a result, it was placed onto the floor of the vehicle.

She then looked for a place to sit, but there wasn't any space. With no other choice, the girl sat on the knees of the man hogging the passenger seat.

"Hold it!"

Itami was dumbfounded at her sudden action.

He wanted to stop the black-clad Goth Loli, but if he touched somewhere dangerous, it could be painted as sexual harassment and trigger a huge incident, so he didn't. Because of the language barrier his protests and curses in Japanese like "Hey! Wait! Wait!", "Don't touch that", "Don't touch the pistol and fire extinguisher", "Get out first", "Wah, what the hell are you bringing along!" were ignored completely.

The place the girl sat down upon was his knees.

He had to shout “Hold it!” at this stage.

One side wanted to push the other away while the other side was fighting for a place to sit. The low class fighting thus began.

“●×△ □○○○! ! ! ! !”

“△×¥ ! ○△××× ! !”

And so, the struggle between two parties who couldn’t communicate verbally ended with Itami giving half his seat away.

## Chapter 5

The JSDF paid close attention to the safety of their troops. Thus, when they were deployed to foreign lands, a defensive base camp would first be built. With that base as their stronghold, they would have a refuge during an emergency. For example, they had done this in Samawah, Iraq.

Contrary to the old military view which thought little of human lives, they were now used to carrying out disaster relief missions to save people. Moreover, the JSDF paid more attention to defense than their predecessors. This was the result of the gradual change in the political climate in Japan after the last World War

Furthermore, on the other side of the Gate was their homeland. In other words, defending the Gate was the main reason why the JSDF was here. By using both political and military methods, they were to conquer and secure the land surrounding the Gate. This was the mission of the JSDF. Mapping the land surrounding the Gate by taking aerial pictures and deploying scouts was also part of their plan.

Other than that, the construction of a fort, which was considered a relic of the last century, was also included in the plans.

The fort was not a hastily constructed field fortification of dirt or sandbags, but rather, it was built with reinforced concrete, with the intention of making it a permanent defense structure.

It had been 3 weeks since the JSDF took over the land around the Gate. After working tirelessly for several days and nights, Arnus Hill had become an impregnable fortress.

The uniformly-built hexagram-shaped fortress displayed the character of the aide that thought up this design.

Most of the people who viewed the fort with a bird's-eye view said that it looked like the six-sided fortification at Hakodate.

When a normal civilian became an officer of the JSDF, they would read up on military history and debate the pros and cons of a fortified castle, reviewing the ways to defend and attack such an installation.

However, there were some deviants who would giggle and say this was a magic formation. That's right, the people who knew nothing about the mysteries of magic had unintentionally constructed a large scale hexagram that would surprise anyone knowledgeable about the arcane arts in Arnus Hill and its vicinity.

For now, let's change the scene.

The roaring sounds of the engines of a HMV, a Type 73 Truck and a Light Armored Vehicle (LAV) made a cloud of dust in their trail.

The elderly, women, and children in the vehicles had to endure the rocking of the vehicle from sharp turns and changes in speed, causing their heads and bodies to collide with each other. Gritting their teeth, they endured the pain.

Looking out the window of the vehicle, the view was blocked by the escaping Coda villagers.

And the black shadow falling on them from the sky.

It was the Flame Dragon.

It was the third day of the exodus from Coda Village, and the refugees thought they were out of the Flame Dragon's hunting grounds. However, the beast suddenly appeared and immediately began attacking its prey.

Thanks to the prior knowledge of the Flame Dragon's appearance courtesy of the JSDF, Coda Village and a few other nearby villages had all simultaneously fled from the beast. After the Flame Dragon couldn't find any humans or Elves to prey on, it followed its nose to a place filled with humans.

Since the preparation for escaping had taken some time, and they were weighed down by their luggage, the slow speed of the Coda Villagers had allowed the Flame Dragon to catch them.

"Fighting with monsters is the JSDF's tradition! Who'd have thought that we would be doing it here!"

Sergeant Major Kuwabara shouted furiously at Kurata, "RUN! RUN!". Maybe it was due to the over-secretion of adrenaline by the brain, but a hint of joy could be heard in his voice.

The Flame Dragon swooped down at the villagers who had stood frozen in place. Seeing this, Itami shouted in the direction of the speeding LAV.

"Suppressing fire! LAV! Shoot him with the machine gun!"

Private Sasagawa mustered all the strength in his body to hold on to the handle of the .50 caliber machine gun while it made sounds like a jackhammer in a construction site.

The thick cartridges fell messily to the ground amidst gouts of black smoke as 12.7mm bullets created sparks on the Flame Dragon's back

However, the tough dragon scales deflected all of the bullets.

"It's useless!"

Hearing Sasagawa's words, Itami shouted in reply, "Don't worry about that! Just keep firing! Fire! Fire! Fire!"

Although airsoft guns firing BBs could not kill people, being hit by them was annoying. As such, even though the dragon's body was covered in tough scales which could not be penetrated by bullets, it was still a living thing and possessed the sense of touch. Itami ordered his subordinates to keep firing.

Blossoms of fire erupted from the flash suppressors of the Type 64 Howa rifles.

The Flame Dragon could not bear the rain of bullets. Its attack slowed down, which allowed the farmer who was already in its mouth to escape.

The horrifying dragon turned his head towards the men.

An arrow protruded from its blind eye, but nobody could look directly at its terrifying visage. It was like a scar on a Yakuza's face.

The Flame Dragon breathed fire at them like a flamethrower, but was unable to reach the wildly evasive JSDF vehicles.

"Ono! Yuniryu!! Ono!"

A female teenage voice came from behind them.

As he turned around, golden hair entered Itami's line of sight.

The pale Elf pointed her slender fingers at her eyes whilst shouting “Ono!” repeatedly.

In that moment, although there was a language barrier between them, Itami somehow understood what she meant.

“Go for the eyes!”

The JSDF troopers trained their sights on the face of the dragon and opened fire.

The Flame Dragon looked visibly annoyed as it turned its face away and stopped its movements.

“Katsumoto! Use the Panzerfaust!”

From the LAV, he hauled out a 100mm man-portable anti-tank rocket launcher that had an RHA (rolled homogenous armor) penetration factor of 700mm. It was an infantry weapon that possessed tremendous power.

Exchanging places with Sasagawa who was operating the .50 caliber machine gun, Sergeant Katsumoto clambered up with the Panzerfaust.

However, this weapon was front-heavy and hard to turn. In addition, the safety-conscious JSDF did not have the habit of shooting from an unbraced position.

“Backblast clear!”

“Idiot, just shoot already” --someone scolded under their breath. But after remembering about their training, all they could think was “Heh. It’s the JSDF after all...”

While he was aiming, the Flame Dragon attempted to escape into the sky.

The LAV sped up suddenly, causing Katsumoto's body to thrash around and the dragon to shift out of the rocket launcher's sight picture.

"Damn it! Keep it steady, Azuma!"

"Don't ask the impossible!"

After all, the rocket launcher did not have a computer guidance system. Thus, shooting while moving was impossible. With that in mind, Katsumoto aimed the rocket launcher at the Dragon again.

Due to the LAV suddenly braking and the recoil from firing the rocket, as the trigger was pulled, the Panzerfaust seemed like it would miss.

The rocket accelerated towards the Dragon with flames sprouting from its tail.

The dragon which had lost its balance spread its wings to regain its balance while stepping back to evade the warhead. However, its footing suddenly slipped.

Looking closely, there was a halberd stuck straight into the ground.

On the HMMV, the goth lolita girl had cut a hole in the canvas covering the luggage and thrown the halberd from there. Its handle hit the leg of the animal.

The Flame Dragon fell in the direction of the rocket, which should have missed.

Due to the Neumann Effect<sup>1</sup>, even the tough dragon scales were unable to resist the blast. It exceeded the Hugoniotic elasticity limit of its armour and broke through, blasting a hole clean through it.

If one compared the anatomy of the Flame Dragon to that of a human, the whole left arm was blown off.

The air vibrated with the wail of the Dragon.

Its roar was like its eyes, which could shake the spirit and shatter a warrior's courage. All of the people present had their souls frozen.

The Flame Dragon's piercing roar caused a brief lapse in the JSDF's fire.

Seizing this opportunity, the Flame Dragon flew into the sky.

Spreading its wings, it flew unsteadily as it gained altitude.

The JSDF watched silently as it flew away from them.

The Flame Dragon had been repelled.

Hearing this, anybody would be suspicious and say "Are you kidding me!?"

People who could slay Dragons single handedly would only appear in myths and legends.

Triumphing over bears and buffaloes barehanded was still possible if one trained hard enough. But to fight an Ancient Dragon was suicidal.

Even if an entire order of knights, equipped with magic armor and weapons, magicians, priests, and Elven archers and Spirit users were

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<sup>1</sup> (Shaped charge Neumann Effect: Explosive energy is released directly away from the surface of an explosive, so shaping the explosive will concentrate the explosive energy in the void. If the hollow is properly shaped (usually conically), the enormous pressure generated by the detonation of the explosive drives the liner in the hollow cavity inward to collapse upon its central axis. The resulting collision forms and projects a high-velocity jet of metal particles forward along the axis.)

sent against an Ancient Dragon, it would still be futile. This was common sense in this world. As such, Ancient Dragons meant disaster.

However, the news of “Although it wasn’t defeated, it was still driven back” did not come from a single source, but from many people. Thus, many people believed it. On the other hand, there were people who said “It may be the truth, but are you sure it was a Flame Dragon?”.

The Flame Dragon’s active period occurred every 50 years, as mentioned earlier. In addition, it was hard to imagine that anything could defeat an Ancient Dragon. With that in mind, it would be more convincing to say that the Ancient Flame Dragon was actually a large Dragonewt or a Slither Wyrms.

That said, a very old Dragonewt could grow to the size of an Ancient Dragon. Slither Wyrms were also more dangerous than Wyverns. With that, even killing one of those lesser dragons could qualify a person as a Dragon Slayer. With more than half of the villagers still alive, they had more of a reason to believe that “It’s only at that level.”

In this world, death could come to anyone, at any time. Being lost in a forest meant death, playing beside the river and falling into it by accident also spelled death. Thus, for humans who had an enemy such as the Flame Dragon who can rain death upon them, the news that the dragon was repelled gave them hope and led them to spread the news further. Every one of them were curious about who the new hero was.

There were three types of survivors from Coda Village.

Some of them were villagers who could seek out their family or friends nearby. Those were the lucky ones, as their family and friends guaranteed their safety whilst providing them with accommodation and job opportunities.

The second type were villagers who had no family or friends and had to live the life of a refugee. These people, who made up the majority of the

villagers, had no accommodation or job opportunities. Although they worried about how to live through the next day, they still prayed in gratitude that they had survived this disaster and hoped that Lady Luck would help them as they scattered throughout the land.

Each of the surviving villagers grasped the hands of Itami and his subordinates, and thanked them profusely.

To the refugees, the JSDF were mysterious beings. They had helped them escape and even fought the Flame Dragon, although they had no obligation to do so, and asked for nothing in return.

Given that they could not speak the language, they did not seem like knights or priests of this country. If they were the army of a foreign nation, the villagers would have been slaughtered and pillaged.

Of course, they were not bandits.

The most reasonable explanation for them was that the JSDF was a group of foreign mercenaries that was travelling to look for an employer. Recently, it seemed like the country and its nobles were recruiting troops.

The only thing out of the ordinary was that if they were a mercenary group, they would not aid them without seeking profits. Thus, the villagers were scared about what sort of recompense the JSDF would demand in return for their power.

However, they did not ask for a single penny in the end.

Not only that, despite their praiseworthy accomplishment of repelling a Flame Dragon, they had gloomy looks on their faces and sunken shoulders that made people think that they were on the losing side. They even helped to bury the dead (a priest happened to be nearby and performed simple funeral rites).

As they were parting ways, the JSDF even held their hands tightly and cried.

Gazing at the JSDF who were waving their hands at them even after the villagers were out of their sight, the villagers of Coda Village could only smile bitterly.

The villagers were grateful for their sacrifice and the way they gave aid without asking for compensation, but thoughts of “Can they survive like this?” entered their minds.

“No matter what, weren’t they too kind?.....If this goes on, how are they going to earn a living?”

“Now’s not the time to worry about others. We are also in dire straits, what are we going to do from now on...?”

“Yeah.”

“Humph. No matter how idiotic the lords or nobles are, they definitely won’t let go of these skilled people. No matter how you look at it, that was a Flame Dragon! They fought on equal ground with that monster.”

“Yup. But, their hiring price won’t be low for sure.”

No matter what, they would not be such idiots, right? Although they thought this, the villagers were genuinely concerned; the nobles had a common trait of unquenchable greed.

Anyway, the villagers prayed to their god that this mercenary group(JSDF) with their unusual attire and values would be hired by a good-hearted employer.

Incidentally, the luck of the villagers of Coda Village had not yet run out.

On their journey, they met a lot of people who asked for confirmation. In other words, "Was the Flame Dragon really driven off?".

"It was really a Flame Dragon, I saw it with my own eyes. It looked at me with eyes that said 'pitiful humans'.....huh? Who, you ask? They were the people who wore mottled green clothes. They were humans, for sure. Not Elves or Dwarves. Maybe it's the Eastern tribe's attire. Although they could not speak our language, they were smart and they kept trying to learn our language. They were good people, they helped us to escape without asking anything in return. For free, I tell you! It's true!"

Unlike the bards, they did not have a wide vocabulary and their description of the events was quite rough. But what they had seen with their own eyes needed no exaggeration.

The listeners' imaginations were easily stirred when they heard the survivor's words, leaving a large impression on them. Because the witnesses had seen it with their own eyes, when they were asked "So what was it like?", they could answer their audience's questions.

When the scene was described where the dragon's arm got blasted off, the listeners gulped and quietly said, "How, how powerful."

They parted ways with smiles on their faces and without asking for anything in return.

Even the JSDF troopers themselves would have asked "Who are you talking about?" After all, a tale of heroes that would not even be found in anime was currently spreading among the people.

In the bars or even on the street, the refugees would be stopped and asked "Are you from Coda Village?" And because the villagers saw different things from different points of view, what came out of each of their mouths were naturally different. With this, their words painted a surprisingly realistic scene.

Just by telling their story, the people of Coda Village did not have to worry about food or lodging before returning to their village.

“Knight Norma, what do you think?”

In the Imperial courts, there were female knights who served as aides. One of them, Hamilton Uno Ro, asked her senpai, who was also her colleague, about the tales from the street.

Several knights and their followers sat in the corner of the rowdy tavern, filled with guests. The bar was dirty, and it only had a little space between tables. The place was so noisy that one might not be able to hear what was being said at a nearby table, unless one shouted. Amidst this noisy atmosphere, the knights and their followers sat side by side reaching out with their hands for food and holding their cups full of wine.

Glancing over, there was a girl from Coda Village working as a temporary waitress who was serving her customers from a tray of ale. After she set the plate of dishes down on the table, she described what she had seen, and collected a good amount of tips.

Knight Norma, whose mustache was neatly trimmed, had an uncomfortable look on his face.

While he was at court in the sparkling clean palace, he enjoyed delicious meals prepared by the wives of the nobles or their daughters. Although he was part of the Princess’s order of Knights, they were nothing but a decoration of the court and had nothing to do with the frontlines. And now, an aide like himself was eating crude dishes and murky alcohol.

Although it was a mission, it did not sit well with him.

*How the hell did I get myself into this mess...?* Norma felt like cursing his superiors. Just keeping himself from doing so had taken all of his

willpower. Since it was a direct order from the Princess, the mission of investigating Arnus Hill could not be helped. However, he had expected the Princess to lead the whole order of knights, so that his servants would have to wait on him hand and foot throughout the journey.

However, that willful girl issued orders to station her main forces far behind, only taking a few people to perform reconnaissance. They even hid their identities, intentionally dirtying their clothes, eating the crude black bread and murky wine of common peasants, which he considered unfit for a knight like himself.

Norma raised his hand to signal the waitress for a refill. Seeing how his kouhai did not recognize how bad the situation was for them, he sighed a little.

After he got his refill, Norma shrugged under the innocent gaze of Hamilton who was waiting for his reply.

“If there are that many refugees who said the same thing, then it probably isn’t a rumor. It’s not likely that so many people would come together to tell such a lie. Still, it’s very hard for me to believe that it was a Flame Dragon.”

“I think that if that many people are saying the same thing, then it wouldn’t hurt to believe them.”

The waitress put down a bottle of red wine on the table as she said “It’s true, Knight-nii-san. ~It really was a Flame Dragon.~”

“Hahahahahaha, you won’t fool me so easily.” replied Knight Norma Co Igloo. “Ancient Dragons, Dragonewts, Slither Wyrms, and Wyverns, they are all called dragons. It must be some sort of mistake.”

In reply to his reaction, the waitress pursed her lips in displeasure.

“Now now, don’t mind him. I believe what you just said, so tell me more.” Hamilton said as she gave her a few copper coins. That was way too much for a normal tip.

The waitress’s mood immediately changed. She smiled cutely while saying, “Thank you, young Knight-sama”. Although her attire made her look old, she might be younger than she looked.

“After receiving so much, I’ll tell you what I kept from the others.”

Saying that, the waitress started her story:

When the news of the Flame Dragon’s appearance started to spread, Coda Village became as busy as a beehive. The blacksmith’s wife next door had come over to tell Melissa about the news. It was noon and she was drying her clothes.

“Melissa! Melissa! Bad news!”

They often gossiped about the happenings in the small village and had become quite close. Even if there was no one in the house, she knew where Melissa would be as she went around back to where she dried her clothes to look for Melissa.

Melissa told her son who was taking in the dry clothes to inform her husband who was out in the fields, and then she ran into her home to start packing.

After a short while, her husband came back panting and shouting, “Is everything okay?!?” Apparently, the way their son had described it made him think that the Flame Dragon had already attacked the village.

Seeing that his wife was safe and sound, the husband sat down on the floor in relief. Although she was safe, the real danger was still lurking around the corner. After explaining the situation to her husband, Melissa returned to packing their luggage.

After loading their food, water, some basic daily necessities, a few changes of clothes and their hard-earned savings onto their wagon which was used for farming, it was buckling under the weight of all their luggage.

They used a mule to pull the cart while her son and husband pushed it from behind, and then they started down the road towards the village. When they reached the center of the village, there were already many other villagers also in their wagons crowding the road.

Many wagons had broken down due to their heavy loads, blocking the street.

After wasting precious time waiting for the wagons to be cleared up, they were finally out of the village. By then, the sun was already beginning to set.

At night they set up camp. At daybreak, they proceeded with their journey. However, among the refugees, there were people who were slow and people who were fast.

Three days later, the villages who brought the elders and children along had fallen behind the caravan. The distance between each wagon was widening and those in the back could not see those in front anymore.

Sometimes a wagon's wheels would get stuck in the muddy ground and it would become immobile. Angry shouts of "Get out of the way!" and desperate cries of "Come help!" intertwined with each other, amplifying the frustrations of everyone present.

Scenes of people quarrelling, wagons overturned, luggage scattered all over, children crying loudly and women with obvious looks of despair on their faces could be seen everywhere.

But, in their time of need, their saviors came to their aid.

“They were the Men in Green. There were twelve of them, two of which were girls.”

The waitress’s voice not only could be heard by the Knights, but also by the other patrons. Unconsciously, the tavern had gone silent as Melissa described the exodus of the village as well as the presence of females among the people in green. No one in the tavern knew anything about them.

“What do the girls look like?”

Norma’s question made Melissa “Hmph!” in annoyance.

“Men are pigs. Ugh, whatever. There was a tall female. During the day, she wore a helmet that covered her hair, but at night, when we broke for camp, I saw it clearly.”

“When she untied her ponytail, even I, a fellow female, gasped in surprise. Her hair color was as black as a crow’s feather. If there wasn’t a language barrier between us, I would have asked for the secret to its vivid black colour. Her body was also slim. She was definitely an exotic beauty.”

Hearing her description, the eyes of the men lit up with lust.

“Err, how about the other one?”

“That one was like a cat. Her hair was chestnut brown and she had a small body. Her hair was cut short like a boy’s and she was full of spirit. She was also capable of taking care of others and instantly got along with the children. But even the most powerful men were afraid of her. When my husband got into a fight with Moyer’s husband, she entered into the fight like thunder and used only her legs to beat down those two large men.....”

The men surrounding them instantly lost their interest. A blank atmosphere had enveloped the scene. Such a boyish woman wasn't popular among the men.

"She's got a great figure. Although she was short, her breasts were like cow's udders. Even I grew jealous of those melons. Her waist was also very slim, it was unforgivable. However, her face was more cute than beautiful."

"UWAAAAA!"

"As expected....."

Melissa clicked her tongue in annoyance at the cheering men. Although the customers being excited was a good thing, as a woman, she could not be happy about that.

"Hmm. It was like that. Many things happened, but we still managed to move on. But that beast finally caught up with us."

There was not enough water for the villagers and they didn't have enough food to satiate them. Still, they did their best to endure in order to take another step forward, but they were nearing their limit.

Yet, they continued their difficult journey even as their supplies rapidly dwindled to nothing.

Alas, they finally reached their limit.

Those who could still move continued on, while those who couldn't sat down in fatigue.

The people in green's strange wagon which didn't need any horses to move carried the children and elders who couldn't move anymore. Still, it could not take all of them .

"I couldn't move anymore. Still, I wished for my son to live on. I prayed hard to God, but nothing happened. Those priests said that God exists, but why didn't God help us when we were in such dire straits? I won't do an idiotic thing like praying to God next time."

The bright sky above them suddenly turned dark. Expecting to see rain clouds, the villagers raised their heads and froze in place.

"It was a red Dragon. It had arms and legs, and it spread its wings like a bat. It was those large wings that covered the sky."

The dragon landed. In an instant, Moyer and her husband disappeared before Melissa's eyes.

Only the lower halves of their bodies were left.

Before the people even understood the situation, their natural instinct took over as each of them ran. Carrying their children, they abandoned their luggage as they tried to get away from the monster.

The wagons overturned, crushing many villagers under them.

While everyone was escaping, the Flame Dragon spewed fire all around it. After thoroughly roasting the humans, it swallowed them whole.

They scampered around like baby spiders as they tried to escape. Like a child destroying an ant's nest, the Flame Dragon squashed the escaping villagers under its foot and ate them.

Despair filled the villagers' hearts.

"In that instant, the Men in Green appeared."

Melissa said with a tone of admiration.

“They rode on their wagons, which were faster than horses. On the two wagons, the Men in Green raised their magic magic staffs and attacked the Flame Dragon with spells.

However, the dragon remained unscathed. Even their magic was unable to pierce the dragon scales. But, they didn't give up.

They circled around the dragon repeatedly and kept attacking to buy time for the villagers to escape.

Thanks to them, many of the the villagers survived.

The Flame Dragon turned around to attack the Men in Green. But, the beast could not catch up with their frightening speed. By moving around, they kept themselves safe from the scorching flames of the dragon.

But soon, the dragon got used to their tactics. The people in green who could only cast magic from afar were at a disadvantage.

“At that moment, the leader of the people in green shouted something and they took out that thing.”

“What thing?”

“A giant magic staff. We call it the Divine Rod of Steel. We even heard the incantations. It was ‘Baku-Burasuto-Kuria’. After that, there was a loud bang and the Flame Dragon’s whole left arm was blown off.”

It was that moment when the so-called invincible Flame Dragon was defeated.

After getting injured, the dragon let out an earth-shaking roar and rapidly flew off.

After finishing the story, the people present were silenced by the magnanimity of her tale.

“Divine...Divine Rod of Steel?”

Such an exaggerated name awed them into shocked silence.

After a moment of quiet contemplation, the Knights began discussing their thoughts on this. The tavern also returned to its rowdy atmosphere.

“In-In a nutshell, they were very powerful. Although they look like foreign mercenaries, they had such amazing skills. I think we should employ them. What do you think, Your Highness?”

The vermillion-haired female knight who was about to eat the Ma Nuga meat in her hands was asked a question. She then put the meat back onto her plate on the table to reply to the knight.

Ma Nuga meat was made by wrapping the a long bone from livestock with smoked meat. To people from Earth, it looked like a type of sausage or turkey leg. The meat was roasted and eaten directly without being cut. It tasted magnificent when one bit into it.

Stretching her hands towards her wine cup, Pina Co Lada replied, “I’m quite interested in the weapons used by those people who repelled the dragon.”

Senator Godasen had said it before. “The enemy infantry’s weapon made a sound of ‘Bang! Bang! Bang!’ A moment later, our troops had fallen.”

Based on these words, it seemed to fit the bill with the Coda villagers’ descriptions. The Coalition Army’s defeat at Arnus hill must be related to that magic weapon.

Pina called the waitress to ask her a question.

“Woman, you have seen the weapons of those people. What do they look like?”

Melissa tilted her head as she told her what she had seen.

Although being addressed as ‘woman’ made her unhappy, because of the presence of the young female knight who gave her tips, she decided to tell her the truth.

“In other words, those people used staffs that looked like steel. They made an exploding sound, as well as spitting fire?”

“In my opinion, it is a magic weapon.”

“Then, the staff they used to repel the Slither Wurm.....it’s called the Divine Rod of Steel, right? What does it look like? Try with the best of your abilities to describe it.”

“Didn’t I say that it was a Flame Dragon, not a Slither Wurm?” the waitress insisted. With a wicked smile, she glanced at the men around her.

“You’re being rhetorical. The Divine Rod is good stuff.....Well, I can’t blame you, seeing that you were born in an overprotective environment. But, why don’t you ask the girls who have husbands? It’s the same as a man’s thing. Of course, it’s so large that you can hug it. I don’t think any man here has a thing that’s as big or as black as it...”

The waitress laughed crudely as she went to the other table to take orders.

Confused, Pina looked to the male knights for an explanation.

As if on cue, all of them averted their faces from Pina’s gaze.

She finally set her sights on Hamilton.

“You...you have a fiancée, right?”

She must have thought that she was safe from the line of fire.

The prim and proper Knight, Hamilton Uno Ro, who was drinking soup, sprayed it out in surprise. Her messy short hair shook with her head as she protested, “I-I do.....but I am still a maiden! How would I know about such a things.....ah.”

The men’s eyes landed on Hamilton. “Hmm, that kind of thing, eh?”

Pina’s suspicious gaze pierced her.

Hamilton could only blush furiously as she cowered down in her seat.

## Chapter 6

There were three ways of evacuating the refugees. Two had already been touched on.

The method Itami and the others picked was the third. They chose this method of evacuation because there were only about 20 to 30 people they had to worry about.

Following an armed group of unknown affiliation was just as risky as jumping into a ravine for the people of this world. They might as well have been stripped naked and sold into slavery. However, they had no choice. They were children who had lost their parents when the Flame Dragon attacked, or elderly people who had lost their children, and some were even wounded. Under normal circumstances, the outcome for them would be a long and slow death anyway.

Of course, some of them were different. For instance, there was the Magician Kato and his pupil, who were very interested in the JSDF, as well as the priestess of Emroy.

However, many of the refugees were asked questions that could not be answered, such as “Where do you want to go after this? We’ll take you to wherever you want to go.”

Itami decided to ask the village chief about what to do with the remaining 20 to 30 people. The reply he got was “Leave it to God.”

Itami tilted his head and asked again. After translation, the replies he got were along the lines of “Where nobody needs to take care of them”, “Anywhere”, “Wherever you want”.

He sighed deeply.

The village chief got onto the wagon his family was riding, and spoke to Itami, “I fully understand that you are noble and compassionate folk, and that we must seem cruel and heartless in your eyes. However, it’s already very hard for us just to take care of ourselves... forgive our selfishness in this matter.”

The village chief left without looking back.

Itami and the others had been struck dumb by the sheer callousness of that statement. They knew that everyone left behind had been abandoned.

The HMY was loaded with the orphaned children, the wounded, the Elven girl... all their eyes were on Itami. They were very uneasy about the decision he was going to make here. Because they could not understand his language, they studied the minute changes on his face. Among them, the black-clad goth Loli looked at him with great interest in her eyes.

However, Itami did not feel the great weight of the responsibility everyone was placing on him.

"Well, who cares... Never mind, we'll take care of it."

His innocent smile removed the tension in the air.

Itami's duty was to investigate the inhabitants of this world. Communicating with them, building good relations with them, and collecting the knowledge of this world was a critical part of that mission. Wouldn't it be great if he could bring natives back of their own free will and improve their understanding of this world's language and culture? At least, that was what he thought.

In truth, a civil servant who thought like this would be nearly impossible to find.

Anyone who didn't realize the problem with that sort of thinking would never have become a public servant. What public servants hated the most were people who increased their workload.

"You, you, you..."

Major Higaki grabbed his head, in front of his subordinate who didn't know what he had done.

The officers from the other Advance Reconnaissance Teams remained silent, while the refugees who had been left outside the camp looked around in curiosity.

"Who, who said you could bring them here?!"

"Eh? Was that a bad thing?"

Itami idly scratched his head. Higaki paced around a little, before saying "Follow me" and walking out of his office.

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"General... the reports from the recon platoons we dispatched have come in."

"Oh!"

The man who responded was Lieutenant-General Hazama.

He had been a student of philosophy in Tokyo University, a graduate of that school which only accepted the best of the best. However, the truly inspiring part of his life story was how he enlisted as a private with the JSDF and climbed the ranks until he became the mighty Lieutenant-General he was now. One could say that, although he could have taken the fast-track, he chose to go the long way instead. His catchphrase was "No pain, no gain".

Hazama took off his glasses, and looked from the pile of documents on his desk to 1LT Yanagida.

1LT Yanagida had graduated from the National Defense Academy of Japan (NDA) with flying colours, and under normal circumstances he would have been considered an elite thinker. However, in front of Hazama he never seemed to be able to raise his head. The reason for that was apparently because he failed to get into Tokyo University.

People compare themselves to others by many metrics; academic records, resumes, performance records, and, for members of the JSDF, their ability as warriors. They would always look for fields in which they could surpass others. Then what would happen if an individual who was excellent in all areas appeared before them? Most people would unconditionally accept their inferiority and think, “That guy’s amazing”, but Yanagida was far too proud for that. Perhaps he had an unfortunate encounter as a child, or his parents had raised him that way, but in the face of a superior individual, he did not feel respect, but rather resentment from the bottom of his heart.

“What’s the matter, did you realize something?”

Hazama raised his crew-cut head and leaned back against his chair. The cheap office furniture creaked under his weight. He didn’t think too much about Yanagida’s resentment, though he did think, “I need to keep an eye on this fellow.”

“Several reconnaissance reports have arrived, but I didn’t think they were that important because they’re just raw data...”

“That’s true, make sure they do a good job.”

Hazama did not feel that a simple reconnaissance would give him a full picture of the situation. However, he was looking forward to understanding the inclinations of the locals.

Their relationship with the locals, the safety of the JSDF units, and the opinions of the Special Region with respect to Japan and governmental influence were all closely interlinked. Ignoring the locals' feelings would breed contempt, or worse, active insurgency and that would outweigh any benefits of such callousness. As such, it was critical to understand what the locals meant by righteousness, evil and so on. For instance, Islamic cultures hated dogs and preferred men to have beards.

"The only common point between the teams was that, despite the difficulty, they all made first contact. The locals, who superficially resemble human beings, primarily make their living through agriculture, with forestry being a close second. Their population is distributed into settlements and is generally low. The 6th Recon Platoon has only found mercantile installations in villages with populations of over 500 people. They mainly sell clothes, tools, farming equipment, oil lamps and other miscellaneous living essentials... This is the stock list and the price catalogue. Several photos are also enclosed."

Yanagida concluded his briefing by placing a sheet of photocopied A4 paper on Hazama's desk. He excelled in this field of work and rarely made mistakes.

Hazama went through the materials as if he were reading a table of figures. However, this information was critical for understanding the economic situation of the Special Region, so he had to send it back through the Gate for study by government experts.

“At the present moment, we do not know if there is a central authority for the Special Region. Every village encountered has been led by a chief who looks after the villagers.”

“How do they choose the village chiefs?”

By understanding this, they could theorize if this world was run by a democracy, an oligarchy, or a simple autocracy.

Yanagida sighed with exaggerated loudness, hinting at how difficult that investigation would be.

“All we need is to invite a few residents over for...”

“It would be troublesome if we brought them over without properly communicating with them, no? Having it phrased as kidnapping or forced transportation would be a headache...”

“About that...”

After laying the foundations, Yanagida was ready to make his main thrust. Carried by the flow of the conversation, Hazama now seemed ready to listen to his subordinate’s words.

“Fortunately, Itami’s team has brought back some refugees from Coda Village.”

“Oh, that would be the place where the Dragon was sighted.”

“Indeed.”

Japan's high-ranking officials, including Hazama, could only equate the beasts of the Special Region to dangerous animals like bears, sharks and the like. It was incomprehensible to them that people would abandon their villages over such minor threats. They simply could not imagine such dangerous creatures in modern Japan, so all they could say was "It can't be helped if something like that happened there, right?"

One of the reasons why it was so hard for them to believe in the danger posed by the Dragon was because of the Wyverns which had attacked Arnus Hill. They had been easily brought down by normal anti-aircraft weapons.

"Well, why don't we lodge the refugees from Coda Village here? We'll explain it as a necessary measure. The people concerned will be grateful, and nobody will think it's a kidnapping, right?"

Yanagida began his explanation.

The plan was to build a refugee camp near Arnus Hill and take them in. Since the evacuation of Coda Village was caused by a wild beast, it would not be a temporary measure. While the refugees were there, it would be possible for the relevant research and investigation personnel to gain significant information from the refugees. Through extended daily interaction with the refugees, they could solve the language barrier problem, and gain a clear understanding of the Special Region's economic situation.

In truth, the Ministry of Defense and the Prime Minister's Office had started making demands for detailed internal reports on the Special Region. Yanagida was under a lot of pressure, so he wanted to show them results quickly.

Hazama tapped the table with his finger.

“What happens if a fire fight breaks out? The enemy’s main armed force has ceased combat operations, but this is still their target.”

This was one of the most obvious questions to ask.

“We need to consider how enemy forces will deal with locals who have had contact with us.”

He recalled an incident in the past, where Japanese citizens had been massacred because they were too close to a hated minority or religion.

“When the enemy approaches, we will take the refugees in and guarantee their safety. Although how the enemy treats the residents, be it torture or massacre, is not technically our concern, we cannot stand by and let such things happen.”

Hazama furrowed his brow. He approved of the plan to take in the refugees. He had been thinking of something similar himself, so he had no opposition to it. What annoyed him was Yanagida’s blunt way of speaking.

There was a limit to how much one person could think about by themselves, because there would be mistakes or omissions made. Even if they housed the refugees within the base itself, it could cause all sorts of problems. The enemy might have infiltrated the refugees and bringing them into the base would invite sabotage, for instance. But they could not locate the refugees far away just because they were afraid of taking risks.

In order to make the ones who had caused the Ginza Incident surrender to them on the negotiation table, they would need to firmly grasp the situation in the Special Region. They would need to investigate and understand this land, this domain, as well as this world's government.

Just as Hazama was about to ask about the refugee center during combat operations, a voice came from outside.

"I'm coming in."

There was a sign outside Hazama's door which said, "No need to knock, just enter". As a result Maj. Higaki entered after announcing himself.

"I have a report. 3rd Recon Platoon has returned. Although they're back... actually... that Itami, he..."

And just like that, the matter of taking in the refugees was approved.

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"Yo, Itami."

Itami halted in place as he heard his name being called.

While his superiors chewed him out for nearly an hour, Itami had put on a mask of carefully feigned ignorance and let the words flow in one ear and out the other. In the end, the meeting (which felt more like an interrogation) had ended with a "Since you brought them back, it can't be helped."

He had to report to Ichigaya (the Ministry of Defense) about how he had been protecting those refugees who were unable to care for themselves,

such as the sick, injured elderly and the children. While the lecture was unavoidable, when Itami said that he had forced his way through for humanitarian reasons, the other side could only smile bitterly and acknowledge his efforts.

“Although, you’ll have to take care of them.”

That didn’t mean that Itami would have to pay for them out of his own pocket, but that Itami would be in charge of arranging the protection of the refugees. That was the condition placed on him.

Itami thought about feeding the refugees and sleeping arrangements for them, and left the black corridor for the staircase. If he put in a requisition with the ration team, he could probably solve the first problem. Granted, they would be eating combat rations, but they could hardly pick and choose. The real problem was arranging for beds for them. The barracks on the base were not completed yet, and the team members had to make do with the frames of the buildings. Tents were the only way out, it would seem. *Preparing the documents, recording the required items, the chops... ahhh, what a pain*, Itami thought as he stepped out into the corridor.

So when he heard the voice, he turned his head back very, very slowly.

After looking back, he saw someone sitting on a chair in the shadows, as well as a mote of light from a lit cigarette. The wisp of smoke which curled up to the ceiling came from a mouth that was curled up in a sly smile.

It was 1LT Yanagida.

“Itami, did you do it on purpose?”

“Do what on purpose?”

1LT Yanagida was younger than him, but he had been a lieutenant longer than the freshly-promoted Itami. When ranks were the same, seniority took precedence. On the other hand, Itami didn't like Yanagida at all. His principle was to involve himself as little as possible with people he didn't like. That way would reduce friction and smooth over painful incidents in the other party's memory.

“Don't act dumb. Everyone knows it. You've never missed a single periodic check-in before, so who's going to believe you when you say comms are bad? Were you afraid of being ordered to abandon the refugees?”

“Ahhh, well, about that... it's a different world, after all. It's hard to predict the condition of the ionosphere and the magnetosphere, right? Plus, there's probably sunspots here too... ah ha ha ha...”

Itami scratched his head while he laughed like an idiot. It felt bad, but he didn't particularly need to convince Yanagida. Even if no one believed him, the report still said, “Because of poor communications, I could not receive further instructions, so I made a judgement call and brought the refugees back to the base.”

“Hmph, you're really trying to cover it up, really...”

Yanagida took a long drag on his cigarette and exhaled. Along with the smoke came a sigh.

“Eh, well, we had to deepen relations with the locals sooner or later anyway, this was just ahead of schedule. Even Top thinks of it that way

too. But to us... well, it's a pain in the ass. Our plans are all in a mess now.

Yanagida sounded kind of helpless as he said that.

When he saw the state Yanagida was in, he couldn't help but feel guilty.

"You'll be spiritually rewarded for it, sooner or later."

Yanagida forcefully put out his cigarette in an ashtray and shrugged.

"That's not enough. It's nowhere near enough."

"Well, someone's being petty today... what do you want me to do to cheer you up?"

Yanagida smiled thinly, then rose.

"We'll talk about it elsewhere."

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The sun was slowly setting, and to the west, the sky turned red where the day would end.

As they watched the sky, the two men at the clothes drying point of the West No. 2 Barracks (temporary) looked at each other.

Yanagida leaned against the fence and lit a cigarette before speaking.

“Judging from the information we’ve collected earlier, this world is a goldmine. The DNA sequences of the creatures here are very similar to ours. For all we know, we could even breed with them. The exact theory is still in the hands of the scholars, but what I can tell you is that we can live in this world. We’re breathing this world’s air now, and although our food is imported from the other side of the Gate, if the creatures here can eat it, then we should be able to eat theirs with no difficulty.

This world’s environment has not been destroyed or polluted. There’s a lot of land and its plants are lush and vibrant. And those elements which would be considered rare earths back in our world are abundant here. The civilization level of the locals is as far from us as an ant would be from an elephant, which is an overwhelming advantage for us. This world has only opened its gates to Japan. This is either great good fortune or a disaster in the making.

Investments in Japan’s resource entrepreneurship are going through the roof in the New York, Shanghai and London Stock Exchanges. Oil and ore-related stocks are going down. Nagata-cho’s MPs are in consultation with the Economic Federation people day and night. The diplomatic services are going crazy trying to handle the NATO countries. However, the government, the most critical part of this whole business, is having trouble dealing with it. China, Germany and the other resource-providing nations are starting to demand ‘The Special Region should be internationally controlled’. The problem of whaling can be explained away by being our country’s culture, so even if the whole world looks down on us, it’s fine, but when it comes to the economy, our country still isn’t strong enough to make enemies of half the world.

So I’m telling you, Itami, this is what Nagata’s people want to know.

They want to know what this world has that is worth antagonizing half the world for.”

“And if there is such a thing?”

“Obviously someone who possesses something is stronger than someone who doesn’t, you should know that. The People’s Liberation Army massacred many Tibetans and Uighurs, China’s poisoning of frozen gyoza, the Russians unilaterally tearing up the natural gas mining agreement because they’re wealthy, South Ossetia seceding from Georgia, in the end, all of these people managed to do what they did because they had resources which everyone wanted. You could even say that if we could gain something from the Special Region which was worth antagonizing the whole world, we might resort to any means necessary to secure it.”

Itami shrugged.

“Yanagida, I didn’t know you were thinking so much about our country. At least now I know you’re a patriot. However, people have many uses. In truth, I’m not really interested in all this geopolitical stuff. See, what I’m thinking about now is how the children I brought back are going to eat and sleep. So what exactly do politics have to do with my job?”

“Didn’t I tell you? They want to know what value this place has. No, that’s not right, they want to know where the valuable things are. Whether the Special Region belongs to Japan or it’s managed by the international community, anyone with that information will have an overwhelming advantage. You do know that you’re in the best position to gain this information, right? All the other recon teams did was check out what the villages were selling and add a few new words to our vocabulary. What you did was gain the trust of the people here. As long as you’re around, we can find out where they build things, where they hide things, how to communicate with them, and so on.”

"Hang on, Yanagida. Do you expect me to ask the kids where treasure is buried? Where the oil fields are? Do you think they'll tell me if I just ask them? I'm sorry to say this, but I suck at geography, even though I went through university. Do you think these uneducated children will do any better? I can tell you right now that they won't know anything that doesn't concern their immediate daily lives."

As he said this, Itami thought about the silver-haired girl with a wagon full of books and the old man that was her master. It would probably be more productive to let the linguists go through their books.

"Finding people with information and obtaining that information is absolutely critical."

After hearing this, Itami could not go on.

"Itami, of late, you've been allowed a lot of freedom in your activities. Your next mission is going to depend heavily on how well the officers can write, but regardless of what your orders contain, your final objective remains the same."

"Dammit, I'm tired of this shit."

Itami continued cursing bitterly.

"Hmph! Well, you were happily spending taxpayers' money up till now, so how can you say, 'Oooh, I don't like it, I don't want it'? Better work hard."

Yanagida tossed his cigarette butt away after he finished.

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Although he could not see what the future would bring, practically speaking, he had to handle this carefully. Since the whole situation was a mess, proceeding without a plan would be counterproductive. Even so, the people who lived in these conditions were probably used to it.

In any case, he had to get them something to eat.

In any case, he had to start pitching tents for the refugees to sleep in.

In any case, he had to take the wounded to the doctors.

In any case, he had to distribute clothing.

The elderly people or the older children could take care of the younger children.

After a few days of these “In any cases”, he could probably relax a little. Living in tents was not going to be a long-term arrangement, especially since the people who would do so were children and old people. They would obviously want strong walls and a roof over their heads.

After listening to Kurokawa and Kuribayashi’s suggestions, Itami was currently about two kilometers away from the south of Arnus Hill. They were building a campsite for the Coda Village refugees in the patch of forest located there.

For convenience’s sake, they should have built the camp closer to the hill, but that ran the risk of involving them in any fire fights that

occurred, so after studying the local terrain and conditions, they picked this place.

Actually building the place was the job of the engineers, but it was up to Itami to provide resources, expendables, schematics, blueprints, and so on. MSGT Nishina was experienced with this sort of thing and had provided a lot of useful feedback. Though he got frustrated by Yanagida's nitpicky obsession with details (down to pointing out punctuation errors), in the end, he managed to obtain a computer from his superiors to help with his problems, and he spent the whole of the second day sleeping.

"If it were a government bureaucrat doing this, he'd have finished it with one hand."

After hearing MSG Nishina's words, Itami gave thanks that he had never entered civil service.

"Well, I'm a public servant too, but because of special duties, we're hardly related any more. Ah, I'm lucky to be a public servant on special duties!"

Sometimes he would mumble these words, and sometimes he would shout them.

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Preparing for a task was very troublesome. But once a mission started, the JSDF worked fast.

In the blink of an eye, they clear-cut a stretch of trees, and after moving the ground with heavy equipment, they easily built a set of roofed houses.

Lelei could only watch this scene with her mouth open and her tongue tied.

“...Well, looks like we can unload our luggage at last. I need my sleep.”

Having resigned himself with these words, he vanished back into his tent. After watching her Master, Lelei could not help but agree with him.

Their carriages were not drawn by horses, but they ran faster than horses.

Their magic staffs could force back a Flame Dragon.

Their sturdy, vast fortress at Arnus Hill.

Their gigantic iron dragonflies soared through the sky while making terrible noises.

The way they could instantly turn huge trees into planks, where even a team of woodsmen would take half a day just to fell a single tree.

Their carriages with giant shovels that could do the work of a hundred men in a flash.

And then, there was the way they built houses in moments.

In truth, she was growing jaded to these surprises.

The children and elderly who knew nothing had been shocked into silence. They gave thanks in earnest and sincerely accepted these benefits. As for Lelei, who was wiser but still could not make sense of these unreal circumstances, her brain had long since overheated.

“...Papa will be disappointed that he missed seeing something like this. I have to tell him later...”

The Elf girl’s body had recovered quickly, and she was dressed in the clothes that the people here had given her, which were a shirt and pants made of a stretchy, yet soft material (which she later found out were called “T-shirt” and “jeans”). She watched the proceedings silently.

Lelei was envious.

She couldn’t bear to watch any more. All she wanted to do was curl up under her blankets. Well, she had already forgotten that she was supposed to be a guardian of the forest, and watched in mute surprise.

However, since she had chosen the path of the sage, she could not leave these difficult-to-explain circumstances as they were. After all, a sage’s ambition was to conquer the mysteries of the world with wisdom.

After properly motivating herself, she set forth.

As she got close to the moving iron-skinned carriages, the workers there looked at her with a mix of surprise and fear. They seemed to be shouting something along the lines of “it’s dangerous”. If she were run

over by such a large vehicle, she would probably be squashed into paste. Because of that, they were probably trying to keep her away.

Just then, a vehicle puffing plumes of smoke rolled up from the corner of the construction site. Lelei proceeded to study its structure carefully.

She understood with a single glance.

That being said, a “mobile kitchen” was a great idea. Its advantages were obvious for the military, but even trading convoys that travelled long distances would appreciate it. After all, it took a lot of effort to set up cooking fires.

She thought about what the man had said to her with a smile as she stood in front of it.

“Please wait a while, we’ll be done soon.”

Sadly, Lelei could not understand his good intentions.

Lelei could tell that they were trying to learn the local language. They repeated their words, and were eagerly trying to talk to her. While the results were not very obvious, at the very least, they could communicate. However, if Lelei waited until they learned how to speak the local language, she would not be able to learn anything. She wanted to know about the tools and technology they used, as well as what they thought about. To do that, she would have to learn their language. Thus, Lelei steeled herself, and began speaking to the man.

Leading Private Furuta smiled to her as he showed off his knife skills, which he was proud of.

His nickname of “Shopkeep” was not for show. He had joined the JSDF to earn enough money to open his own shop. The pension he would get after his contract expired was important to accomplishing that goal.

The girl pointed at the small pile of ingredients.

“Hm?”

“Uma-seu seru?”

She was pointing to the radishes and saying something. She repeated the same word, and with some annoyance, Furuta said, “It’s a daikon, daikon.” But after he said that he thought, “Crap, I have to be nice to her.”

“Die Corn?”

“Yes, a daikon.”

Furuta picked up the daikon and waved it around.

One could say that the pinnacle of Japanese cuisine was sashimi, and one could also say that the best accompaniment to sashimi was daikon.

Raw fish cuisine had started becoming popular the world over, but not everyone welcomed it yet. After all, Europeans and Americans found eating raw fish barbaric.

Then, what about this world? As he thought about this, Furuta spoke to the silver-haired girl.

“Core Rekt, Daikon.”

“Die Corn.”

Lelei tilted her head as she puzzled it out. There was a “Core Rekt” in front of that noun, so it should mean something.

Perhaps this vegetable was called a “Daikon”.

“Daikon.”

The man smiled, and nodded as if to say “that’s right”. While he nodded, he showed her how he could cut the daikon into thin strips that looked like sheets of cloth. As she watched his exciting knife skills, Lelei wondered if all men in their world were master chefs.

With that, the sage Lelei La Lelena, though burdened by some misconceptions, threw herself into the study of the Japanese language.

## Note

Yanagida talks about some things with Itami, here’s a brief explanation of the terms he mentions.

The Tibetan problem: this should be referring to the 1959 Tibetan Uprising and the Uighurs, the Urumqi 7.5 Violent Incident, which was a

series of violent riots that took place in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region.

The frozen gyoza poisoning incident refers to police discovering in 2008 that 10 people in Japan got sick from eating gyoza tainted with pesticide, and those gyoza were traced back to Tianyang Foods in Shijiazhuang, Hebei. Chinese Police arrested the culprit in 2010 Mar 26, Lu Yueting, who poisoned the gyoza as revenge.

**The Georgia and South Ossetia incident refers how Georgia got close to NATO after declaring independence from the USSR, and Russia wanted Georgia's natural resources too. During the 2008 Olympic games Georgia attacked South Ossetia, but Russian forces beat them back.**

## **Chapter 7**

The three waves of attacks by the Coalition Army could not really be considered a battle. A better example would be a horde of lemmings ignoring a cliff before them and committing mass suicide. And of course, the biggest reason for this was because the Empire did not provide any intelligence about the enemy.

At that time, the flags of over 21 nations were raised in the camps of the Coalition Army, and their forces numbered over 100,000. Hailing from all over the continent, the sight of soldiers from various nations gathering in one place was awe inspiring.

There were light cavalry on bare-bodied horses.

There were heavy cavalry, sheathed in thick layers of armor.

There were dragon-riders, mounted on Wyverns that soared through the sky.

There were battle mammoth units, which shook the earth with every step they took.

There were small-bodied soldiers who looked extraordinarily tough from the southern nations.

There were heavy infantry, who bore large, rectangular tower shields.

There were spearmen, whose points formed a forest of steel.

And then there were crossbowmen, catapults, ballistae, and others gathered together.

Though Goblins and Ogres were treated like beasts of war in the Imperial Army, some of the other nations let them wear armor.

Because they came from different lands, they competed through the splendor of their uniforms.

This time, their combined battle strength was equal to that of an army three times their actual number, and their advance darkened the sky and shook the earth for days. Everyone felt that this battle was a foregone conclusion.

Originally, Arnus Hill was designated as a sacred place, but in truth it had been little more than a slightly slanted hillock.

There were no trees to block one's field of vision and no large rivers to block routes of advance, nor were there precipitous cliffs. It was simply a little bump in the earth in the middle of a large expanse of open space.

They had been told that the top of the hill had been taken by the enemy, but they had not received any information about the local terrain at all. According to the Imperial troops in the area, the invaders from another world seemed to be doing strange things like digging holes and ditches, as well as surrounding themselves with a strange curled fence of little needles.

If they could build underground fortresses like Dwarves, it might have been troublesome, but Humans could only do that very slowly. It would be impossible to complete it within a month or so.

That being the case, the victors would be the ones with superior numbers.

King Duran of the Elbe Kingdom combed his white-streaked hair back and tried to guess at what Emperor Molt Sol Augustus was thinking when he had gathered this many troops from the Coalition to do battle with so few invaders.

Enemies of that number should have been easily taken care of with the Empire's own military power. There should have been no need to gather the armies of the Coalition.

Therefore, gathering the Coalition Army was not a military move, but a political one.

For instance, did he intend to demonstrate his own might before the Coalition Army? However, if that was the case, he would only need to summon the kings before him instead. Such great fighting power would not be needed. There must be some reason why he wanted to assemble over 100,000 men. After all, feeding so many men was not a trivial matter.

Perhaps he intended to use this huge force to attack some country, but since the Coalition Army had been raised with the intention of protecting the continent, there was no justification for using it as an army of conquest.

“Then, Your Excellency, how shall we proceed with the attack?”

Normally, Archduke League’s words would have been worth considering in meetings with the other military leaders. However, all of them were thinking, “Mere tactics are useless when we possess such military might. In the end, we will crush them like a strong hand crushing an egg”. As such, they did not give it much thought.

In truth, he had summoned Archduke League more to mock his paranoia than for a discussion.

“Your Excellency, you should seriously think about it yourself.”

“You may say that, but if it’s just our troops moving out, we still need to consider formations and tactics. Still, the enemy looks to number 10,000 at most. In comparison, we have a 10 to 1 advantage in numbers and the fighting power of 300,000 men, so wouldn’t a mass attack end the battle without any effort? As for the enemy condition, we can probably figure it out once we make contact with them.”

"It is as you say."

"You're surprisingly sensitive for a man of your age."

Duran did not hear League's mockery as he was lost in thought.

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The movement of a large army would need time. One reason was because the roads were not flat, even, or even present, but the main reason was the sheer scale of the movement. After all, it took almost half a day to travel from the head of the formation to the rear.

Setting up camp would also take a lot of time, about 10 to 20 days.

Even so, the Coalition Army that reached Arnus Hill, encircled the hill in accordance to their prior arrangements, and began forming their battle lines while keeping a safe distance from the enemy.

That distance would be determined by individual experience. That was to say, they had to consider the ranges and minimum safe distances for archers, ballistae, catapults and so on. However, the JSDF had cleverly camouflaged their trenches and rifle positions so as not to let the enemy discover them.

As a result, the four thousand men of the Arguna Kingdom, the vanguard element of the Army, were now in great danger.

The Imperial troops that should have been stationed at the nearby hills had vanished without a trace; could it be that they had already been defeated? If that was the case, they had to rescue the survivors. The Arguna King had this in mind when he ordered his men to advance.

The Kingdom of Arguna was a small country with no special features. Its economy revolved around agriculture and animal husbandry. Because they had no special features, they lacked appeal, but they might have been counting on that to avoid being swallowed up by the Empire and the surrounding countries. Because of that, their troops were made of Ogres and Goblins with bows and battleaxes, followed by their mainstay troops, the heavy infantry and bowmen, with sorcerers as a final battle line.

This was their typical battle plan.

Their scattered bowmen would fire, and then the mighty Ogres and Goblins would slash into the enemy formation to throw them into confusion.

Next, the heavy infantry would advance in a densely-packed formation, their square shields formed into a mobile shield wall, marching in lockstep until they entered the fray.

If they had enough sorcerers remaining, they would launch a magical attack in concert.

Finally, the troops would open up and the cavalry would charge in to secure victory.

This was their usual tactic.

That was why they did not understand what had happened to them.

What hit them was a massed artillery barrage from the JGSDF's artillery units.

The JGSDF artillery was famed for their firing skill, which they demonstrated by drawing a picture of Mt. Fuji in the air with smoke. They showered the enemy with shells, which simultaneously detonated over a huge front.

That was why the Coalition Army said "They were blown away in a moment."

The victims were troops from the Kingdom of Arguna, who served as the vanguard, as well as the men of the Modwan Kingdom, and total losses were estimated at 10,000 men.

Their fire was intended to utterly destroy the enemy who had entered their kill zone. Therefore, they brought overwhelming firepower upon their foe. After that first volley, the attack was concluded.

"I stood in formation, and thought for a moment that Arnus Hill had erupted. Princess, have you ever seen a mountain erupt? In my youth, I once saw a volcano erupt in the mountains. It was as though the entire mountain had exploded. There was no sign of it beforehand, like earthquakes, and then I heard the air tearing apart, followed by an unimaginably vast explosion. My heart nearly jumped out of my mouth, and that was but one of several occurrences.

As for what had happened... we halted to make sure of the circumstances, but all we saw before us was thick, black smoke.

Soon the smoke dispersed, and it was as if someone had driven a giant plough across the ground. In the earth that was dredged up we saw the

bodies of the Arguna and Modwan armies, mashed into the ground like rice grains in a paella dish...”

Duran closed his eyes and shuddered as he recalled that scene.

Besides him was a nun, who was trying to feed him some seafood paella. But he did not eat it, instead turning his face away.

“And what of the two kings?”

Duran shook his head when he heard Piña’s question.

“How shall I put this...?”

Piña had searched through the villages near Arnus in the hope of finding the Coalition Army after the battle had started. The conclusion she had reached was that the Coalition Army had retreated back after losing their commander.

Though it was called a retreat, it was more like the shredded remnants of the Army who were limping home, given that none of the soldiers or officers had escaped intact. They were lucky that the enemy had not pursued them, which was how they survived. In this condition, the arduous trek home would probably be even more agonizing than battle itself. In truth, the bodies of troops who had fallen out had already been buried by villagers throughout the land.

Before long, Piña heard that a nunnery in service of the god Hoboro had taken in a man of high birth. When they rushed to the place, they found that it was King Duran of the Elbe Kingdom.

He was over sixty years old, and perhaps because of stress or some other reason, all his hair was now white.

His body could not endure a long journey on foot, and the troops who had been fortunate enough to survive had long since escaped. He ordered his few remaining troops who were still faithful to return to the country and spread word of this danger, while he himself recovered his strength in this nunnery. However, this was just a nunnery, after all, and there were no doctors and the food was poor in quality. His strength came back slowly, but bit by bit, it also drained away.

The smell of rot from the stump of his missing leg was beginning to fill the air.

His face was pale, and his blood was not circulating properly, and he had Battle's signs under his eyes. If he stayed in this state, he did not look like he would live long.

"I was in the third wave. This is what I have become. I advanced with the Mocha army into the hillside, but iron thorns blocked our way. By the time we cleared the obstacles and resumed the advance, light fell like rain upon us, and right after that I was blown away in an instant."

"King Duran, I will notify the Empire immediately, and have them ready a physician and a carriage. We'll talk about this after you regain your strength."

Although she was the princess, in terms of the peerage, Duran was superior to her by virtue of being a king. Piña fell to one knee, took Duran's intact right hand, and bowed.

But Duran shook his head.

"I'm sorry to reject the Princess' kindness, but I do not wish to trouble the Empire. Besides, I am not long for this world."

"Why is that?"

"I have been thinking about why the Emperor would summon the Coalition Army to fight this war... after becoming like this, I understood. The Emperor knew this would happen. I think he was angry that we remained intact while his troops were beaten. In other words, the Emperor wanted to have the enemy destroy us for him."

Duran did not use honorifics to dignify the Emperor, which showed his anger. Since he was about to die, he figured he might as well speak his mind.

"Princess, do not say you did not know this. Place yourself in the position of the Empire. You can probably imagine what happened when the Imperial Army clashed with the enemy..."

"Yes. The Imperial Army was beaten, that much I knew. But I did not know what sort of enemy was waiting for us there, nor that the Coalition Army we sent there would end up like this..."

"Please go, Princess. I do not wish someone armoured in lies and wielding a sword of deception to stand before me. The Coalition Army would have fought to the bitter end to protect this continent. However, our greatest enemy was actually behind us. The Empire is our enemy. I say again, Princess, please go."

“Your Majesty. It is too late to ask you to quell your anger, but could you at least tell me what the enemy is like? What magic do they use, what tactics? Please tell me about your tactics as well.”

“I will not speak of them. We made great sacrifices to learn that much. If the Princess wishes to find out, then please proceed to Arnus Hill by yourself. Perhaps the enemy will tell you for the price of your men.”

Piña had tried her best. The Emperor had underestimated their opponents. He thought that he could make up the difference in fighting power with strategy and schemes. However, Piña felt that the enemy and the Empire were on completely different levels. She had the feeling that if the Empire did not understand the enemy’s power, it would be completely destroyed.

As those thoughts ground in her head, the Imperial Princess stared straight at him.

“That will not do. You must tell me everything you know. If not, I will take the Kingdom of Elbe hostage. If your Majesty does not speak, I will lead troops to Elbe and burn it to ash.”

That got Duran’s attention.

“What, what is this!? First you took my soldiers, then my servants, even my life, and now you want my kingdom and family as well... like father, like daughter... Very well, do as you please. Besides, once I die, it is only a matter of time before my country will be swallowed up by the Empire. I can hear Death approaching, so all this no longer matters to me. I will rejoin my family in death, and then we will mock the Emperor and you when you follow us.”

"You've completely lost hope at the brink of death... But the Empire will not lose."

Piña stood, looking down at the dying king.

"Anything is permitted, as long as one is powerful. That is what you believe in. However, we have our conviction and our pride. When we are invaded, we will naturally return the favor. The enemies at Arnus are a mighty army, with weapons of godlike power and tactics of divine potency. They crushed us like squalling babes. The Empire that brought them here will share the same fate as us. 'Anything is permitted, as long as one is powerful', you say? But the enemies at Arnus are stronger than you. The Imperial Army is in grave danger. When you find out and beg for help, nobody will answer. You have sown the wind, and you will reap the whirlwind!"

After Duran shouted these words, he collapsed, gasping on his sickbed.

Piña had no words to say.

Even with power and strength, it was difficult to conquer a heart. It wasn't as though she couldn't do it, but if she had, the king would be dead.

Since there was no more to be gained from the King, she had to give up on him.

Duran's angry cries echoed in her heart, as well as his hatred of the Empire that betrayed him.

"Your Highness, please do not order the knights to attack Arnus Hill."

Piña sighed as she heard the words that hit her right after she left Duran's room.

"Hamilton, how stupid do you think I am?"

"I would not dare. But Your Highness is radiating an air that says 'We ride at once!'"

If they set out, their objective would not be Arnus Hill, but the Capital. Piña thought this, but did not say it.

Her eyes roved over Hamilton, who resembled a very handsome prince at a glance. As if to confirm her gender, Piña gently patted Hamilton's flat chest. Well, it was soft and bouncy.

Piña wondered what the hell she was doing. She could hardly believe she was goofing off at a time like this... Or rather, maybe she was so wound up that she needed to blow off steam.

"Forget it, whether or not we attack, we still need to go to Arnus Hill. We need to see the enemy with our own eyes.

"Ah~ Princess, with just this many people? Won't it be too dangerous?"

"Indeed, it'll be dangerous, but you'll protect me, right?"

With that, Piña left the nunnery.

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Beijing — People's' Republic of China

Nanhai Building

The report on Chairman Dong Dechou's desk described the Chinese Communist Party's strategy to deal with the 24th Far East Report. It was filled with lines of Chinese characters, and it was not only thick but also dense.

Chairman Dong looked at the report his secretary had given him.

The subject was still the Far East Report, but the inside was filled with Kanji, and a large portion of it pertained to the Special Region.

"The Special Region, hm..."

Dong had thought it was some kind of joke from the start.

Japanese anime had had a great impact on the world. His own son constantly bugged his parents to buy it for him, so when he first saw a report talking about a Gate that led to another world, describing monsters and medieval knights that could have come out of a movie, he thought there must have been some kind of mistake.

However, after double-checking it with the news agencies and the diplomats, he knew that this was the truth. Well, Dong's first instinct was that, "This must be a disaster for the Japanese", but once the JSDF had eliminated the soldiers that came from the Gate, Dong could no longer ignore what was behind it.

The predictions said that there were vast lands and ample resources on the other side. Why should Japan have the exclusive right to them?

Even though Japan was a small country which lacked resources, it was a developed country so it was wealthy enough even without the resources on the other side of the Gate.

Indeed, the Special Region was what China truly needed.

China had a population of over 1.3 billion people, which was steadily increasing. It was this vast population which limited the number of people which could enjoy a prosperous life, which required a massive amount of resources and expansive territory. He would even risk the censure of the international community in order to provide his people with a good future and fertile lands.

If the Gate had opened in Beijing, all problems would have been solved. They would explore and develop the Special Region and move their citizens through. That way, the burden on China would be decreased, and they could send resources back through the Gate, so they could ignore sanctions by other nations. However, the Gate had appeared in Japan. Rectifying that problem would be difficult.

Dong finished skimming the report, and sighed.

“As long as the Gate is in Tokyo, the methods our nation can employ are limited. How much of a stake can we have in the development of the Special Region...?”

Dong's secretary replied in accordance to Dong's thoughts.

“It is impossible as long as Japan monopolizes it.”

“Indeed. Because of that, we need to place restrictions on the Japanese government’s actions in the Special Region.”

“Understood.”

“We will promote relations with ourselves and Japan. We will make demands as needed, or negotiate in a give and take fashion. Ideally, we could move half our population into the Special Region.”

“Will we make another China there?”

“I would be overjoyed if we could do that.”

Dong smiled, and placed the report into his drawer.

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Some time ago, the content on TV and the news had started to change.

The public television stations started showing scenes of how the natives of Australia and Tasmania had been massacred and violated and wiped out by the immigrant English convicts.

Or perhaps they would show how the Spaniards destroyed the Incan Empire.

Or Carthage, destroyed by the Romans.

These television shows made the same point, emphasizing and repeating it so they would leave a deep impression in their audience. Be it variety shows, soap operas, quiz shows, weekly magazines, the news, they added their own message to change their viewers' opinions.

The message was how a superior culture crushed and destroyed a weaker one.

They emphasised the tragedies that resulted from ethnic cleansing.

People would naturally sympathize with the underdog. They used this sympathy to sway people.

They promoted the idea that the strong should be rational, and should be controlled.

The images of African children starving in a desert stared out at society.

They paused for thought. They were led to stop and think.

Could it be that we're victims too?

What was the JSDF doing on the other side of the Gate? Fighting the enemy... Right?

The battles on the other side of the Gate received more and more attention. However, there was not much elaboration on them. The people were only assured that they had defeated the enemy's attacks.

Since there were little or no casualties on the JSDF's side, naturally the people wondered about the fate of the people they fought. Were there victims on the other side of the Gate?

At the National Diet, a councilwoman from the opposition party rose and asked that question. The person answering it was the Under-Secretary of Defense.

"In the three engagements, the enemy losses numbered roughly 60,000. None of them were from non-combat personnel."

The opposition party members were speechless.

Simply put, the enemy's single-minded attacks on our defensive position were like the exact opposite of the Hill 203 Incident during the Russo-Japanese War. The enemy was foolish indeed.

Casualties in war were natural. If we lost, our side would have more dead. If we won, the enemy would have more dead. The anger of the citizens after the Ginza Incident was understandable. However, to those people who felt that they were more reasonable and rational, who wanted to treat others with that compassion and understanding, the sort of people who wanted to "save the world with kindness", these figures were unacceptable.

《The Shame of the JSDF? 130 Civilian Casualties?!》

《Falsehoods In The Under Secretary's Reply!》

《Unknown Battles In The Special Region! Were There Non-Combatants Among The Huge Casualties?》

These topics circulated without end in the morning and evening papers.

TV and news reporters mobbed the Ministry of Defense and Parliament House, pointing their microphones and cameras at either the Prime Minister or the Defense Minister.

Prime Minister Hojo had stepped down from his post since his term had expired, leaving the current Prime Minister to deal with the prickly questions asked by the reporters.

Because the Chief of Staff and the Under-Secretary were suspected of corruption, as the person responsible, the Prime Minister's reply was extremely serious. However, his answers were reported as "No Comment", "Those are serious words" and so on, and this only lowered public approval.

At the Diet, the opposition party decided to follow up on that by arranging to have their members seated at the Speaker's podium, facing the Chief of Staff and the Under Secretary, who had to stand before them and answer their questions.

"The civilian casualties that were reported were not caused in combat with our forces in the Special Region, but were caused by a natural disaster."

In response to the Under Secretary of Defense's reply, the opposition councilman asked, "What kind of disaster? Did it have anything to do with the JSDF?"

"According to the reports, it was a dangerous wild beast. It was a creature like those you would see in a kaijuu movie. The JSDF Special

Region Reconnaissance Regiment engaged it in combat in order to rescue the civilians from the kaijuu.”

“A moment please. A kaijuu? You mean to say the Special Region has such life forms?”

“Of course, it is not an actual movie kaijuu, but something similar to it. Special Region Class A Dangerous Beast, AKA ‘Dragon’. If possible, in the future, we will refer to it as a kaijuu. We have recovered a portion of the kaijuu’s body as a sample.”

“Then we will believe this unbelievable story. That is to say, this incident was caused by civilians being involved in combat operations against this kaijuu?”

“No. The soldiers concerned used weapons to attack the kaijuu in order to protect and rescue non-combatant personnel, but all casualties were caused by the kaijuu.”

“Vice-Minister, earlier you said there were no non-combatant casualties. However, why did you not come forward about this incident and its many casualties?”

“The previous query was directed at enemy armed forces attacking the JSDF. During those engagements, there were no non-combatant casualties.”

“We are fully aware of the death toll, and that this is a disaster that has claimed many victims. In the future, please inform us of such things, then, how about the civilians rescued by the JSDF?”

“According to our reports, they have taken refuge in the nearby towns and villages. Because of the kaijuu’s appearance, they abandoned their ancestral homes and were attacked en route to safety by the kaijuu.”

“I see. Then the survivors managed to escape. Do you know anything about their lives now?”

“We have not gone to that extent. Our priority is safeguarding the region around the Gate, and as a result we did not keep track of the refugees’ further movements. However, we have concluded that the injured, the elderly, and the children without places to go will have trouble surviving on their own, and under the judgement of the on-site commander, we have taken them into our protective custody.”

“I see, then what about the people involved? Chairman...?” the opposition councilman said as he shifted his angle of attack.

“In truth, without hearing from a witness, it is very difficult to get a clear picture of the situation from reports alone. Since using the Gate is very dangerous, it places a barrier between us and the people involved. As such, I would like to request that the JSDF officer in charge at the time and some of the survivors be brought here for an interview...”

A request to speak with the relevant officer, as well as the protected locals. If the government had nothing to hide, they should not refuse. The opposition repeated their points.

The decision was made to deflect the attacks of the opposition party and the media with the truth. For that reason, they decided to bring the JSDF officer in question and several representatives of the locals to this side of the Gate.

## Chapter 8

And so, this was the field commander in question.

Early in the morning, Itami sat down diagonally across from the desk of the operational staff officer, ignoring his cold gaze as Itami browsed his favourite web novel sites on his phone

<TL: google.com.sg/search?q=army+s3>

It had only been two days since he was able to use his phone on this side of the gate.

Before the antenna was set up, he could only use it on his vacation days when he went back to Ginza. After installing an antenna for mobile phone usage, it was possible to make personal phone calls from this side of the Gate too. What a joy.

“I haven’t checked it for a long time so there are plenty of updates. Oh, I should download this...”

Unlike the novels in bookstores, web novels contain both original and fan fiction writings, allowing one to enjoy a large variety of works. The amount is so massive that it was impossible to read it all. Hence, it was a great fortune to find one masterpiece. Of course, there were some that you wouldn’t want to continue reading after skimming the first few lines.

Sometimes, Itami would come across a series with great reviews in a forum, only to find it gone from the web. There were times when he wanted to read a series again only to realize it had been taken down. When he thought about this, Itami became depressed.

“Ah~ Lieutenant, are you listening?”

Itami tried his best to tune out the voice coming from behind him.

It was a pleasant sound of a woman, but he decided to play dumb. He was on break now, and didn't want to listen to anything work related.

However, the sound of the operation staff officer clearing his throat made it impossible for Itami to focus on his novel. During times like this, he really wished he had a private office.

“Lieutenant.”

“Ugh!”

It might sound normal in tone and volume, but Itami felt pain in his calf. Could sound hurt people? Did sound have the capability to attack in this world?

As he turned back while thinking about this, Itami saw Kuribayashi and Kurokawa looking at Itami with suspicious eyes. If he had to describe it using manga terms, it was a ‘Jii—tto’ kind of gaze. By the way, the thing that induced a sharp pain in Itami's calf was the tip of Kuribayashi's boot.

For martial artists who reached a certain rank, their fists and feet were equivalent to weapons, even more so for Kuribayashi who had a close combat badge. Was she allowed to use force on defenseless people? The operation staff officer who should have been the witness to such cruelty looked with eyes of approval instead. It appeared that Itami had no allies in this fight.

“May we have a word with you?”

“Who, me?”

Itami placed his phone into his drawer, and turned around together with his chair.

Using a lazy tone to say ‘It is useless to discuss anything with me right now’, Itami expressed how he was feeling at that moment.

“What’s the matter?”

Itami pressed his entire body weight onto the office chair, making it creak.

“It’s about Tuka.”

Kurokawa was talking about one of the refugees under the care of the third recon platoon, the Elf with blond hair and blue eyes, Tuka Luna Marceau.

“What about her?”

“Actually...”

According to Kurokawa, ‘She is weird’.

Specifically, she would ask for two sets of meals when eating. Kurokawa hadn't thought much about it, thinking it was just a cultural difference, but it wasn't so.

"Maybe she wants more to eat? Maybe her setting is an Elf that is possessed by the demon of appetite?"

"No. She asked for two sets of meals. Not double the amount of food, but two sets, including utensils."

Kuribayashi said as she flipped through her logs.

"Hmm? Could she want to save it for someone? Such as a hidden pet or something?"

"One set would be left alone. As for clothes, the extra set she asked for are for men."

Itami didn't understand either. He had a slight headache, and memories he had already suppressed started surfacing.

"Hmm~. Well then, did you ask why?"

"We couldn't communicate well with them, so we are not sure. But, we did ask Lelei-chan, who has the best grasp of our language about why she left the food behind."

"And then?"

"She answered that she didn't know, and that no one else was there during Tuka's meals."

Silence mulled between them. *Maybe she wanted to stay together with someone?* Such a thought came out from Itami's mind.

"Could it be, she had an imaginary boyfriend or something?"  
Itami said jokingly.

However, Kuribayashi and Kurokawa didn't react as he expected. They had thought about the possibility of Tuka having an imaginary boyfriend earlier.

"To be frank, it would be better that way."

Kurokawa muttered worryingly.

"Have you discussed it with a doctor?"

"A shrink did come over. He raised the hypothesis that she was treating her dead father as though he was still alive. But it was impossible for us to judge whether that is normal or abnormal for her species."

"How about asking Lelei's teacher... Kato-sensei, wasn't it? That old man would probably know more."

"We did, but his views were about the same as ours. According to Kato-sensei, she was of a rare race even amongst the Elves. His answers were 'rarely seen' and 'unsure'."

The phrases they knew right now were limited, so it was hard to understand complicated sentences.

‘Couldn’t understand’, ‘Insufficient information’ and ‘Inconclusive’... All these terms were simply translated as ‘Don’t know’. They would need to spend more time conversing with each other to differentiate these terms.

Itami’s interest was perked when he heard that she was indeed an Elf. But compared to that, the important thing was the psychological condition.

“The only thing we can do is talk to her, right? I’m not sure whether or not she is treating someone who isn’t there as if he is alive, but we should do what we can to help her.”

“I think so too. To be honest, it's difficult to tell what’s wrong and without knowing that, I can’t help her more.”

This caused Itami to think.

The tall and short WAC combo of the third recon platoon. Kurokawa was popular among the refugee children. Even the girl in black priestess clothing who troubled others by doing as she pleased listened to Kurokawa. (According to Lelei, she is not a child and is actually much, much, much older.)

Itami shifted his view to Kuribayashi.

“I, I don’t know. I am not trained in counseling, and so I don’t know anything about psychology.”

Indeed, this petite lady with large breasts was a muscle brain that could only communicate with her fist. Leaving something so delicate to her would be like asking a pissed off, drunken gorilla with a bad hangover to perform brain surgery.

"I get it. I will try it out later. But I'm not sure if I can express my intention well."

"The children started learning Japanese recently, I think we will understand each other's language fairly soon."

Itami wanted to point out that Tuka was not a child... but at this moment, the voice of Sergeant Major Kuwahara came from the corridor.

"Commander, it is about time to go. Kurokawa, Kuribayashi, come back soon."

"Ah, coming."

Itami followed the girls to the corridor.

With the command to 'Draw arms', the members of the 502 company split up into platoons and entered the armoury. The members of third recon platoon followed behind them to requisition their munitions.

They gathered before their barracks and tightened the flash suppressors on their type 64 rifles. Since it didn't have a washer, it could fall off when the weapon was used. After tightening their suppressors, they could then fix rifle bipods and/or bayonets onto them.

Black tape was also brought along and used to secure important parts, preventing them from falling off. They were going into a real battle, so if their maintenance was half-assed... Well, with the possibility of bayonet fighting, they had to be careful.

Deploying the bipods, the soldiers placed their rifles on their slings and secured their bayonets at their waist. The bayonets had already been sharpened in preparation for the battle. They were sharpened using a simple grinding wheel, but they were sharp enough.

The platoon members sat down together and loaded their issued bullets into their magazines.

Six magazines for each soldier. With twenty rounds in each magazine, that would be 120 rounds. And of course, grenades were also distributed.

Machine gunner Private First Class (PFC) Furata carefully placed his 5.56mm ammunition belt into the box of his Minimi.

<TL: [wikipedia.org/wiki/FN\\_Minimi](https://wikipedia.org/wiki/FN_Minimi)>

Aside from his own rifle, Katsumoto was also given a 110mm infantry anti-tank weapon known as the 'Panzerfaust 3', which he placed onto the LAV. It would be impossible to damage the creatures known as dragons without this, so the amount of Panzerfausts that were issued increased.

<TL: [wikipedia.org/wiki/Panzerfaust\\_3](https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Panzerfaust_3)>

The 12.7mm heavy machine gun on the LAV was operated by Sasagawa. The ratio of the black painted armour piercing rounds to tracer rounds on the ammunition belt had also risen.

After putting away the spare ammunition and materials, the platoon members practiced their formations with their weapons.

With the command of Sergeant Major Kuwahara, they switched swiftly between file formation, line formation and square formation.

They also practiced gathering and spreading out. Each member watching their own arc of fire, covering every angle. If someone went down, they practiced who would need to take over the casualty's task and what they needed to do. Everyone already knew this, but they still had to drill it repeatedly.

This was the culmination of studying old and new fantasy TV shows prior to the JSDF going into another world. The reason why soldiers with powerful weapons most often fell in battle was because they were cut off from their allies and overwhelmed. In conclusion, working together and supporting each other became an ironclad rule.

After Itami's group finished their preparation, they clipped their magazines onto their rifle and on Itami's command of "Lock and load!" chambered a round and put the weapon's firing selector switch to the "SAFE" position.

"The JMSDF would say something like 'Battle Stations ready!'..."

In the tense atmosphere, Itami's nonsensical words made everyone feel weak.

"That's an anime meta right?"

A female voice mumbled from somewhere.

“Anyway, we are heading out to a potential battlefield, so everyone keep your guard up.”

And with that, they left Arnus Hill and set off for the refugee camp built in an imitation of an apartment building.

There were twenty-five people in the refugee camp right now. Twenty-three of them from Koda village, one from an Elven village, and the Goth Loli priestess who joined mid-way through their journey here.

The housing itself was originally just a trailer, but considering the possibility that it might grow in the future, a building made to last for ten years for four families was also built. That might be so, but the people in the building weren't family or relatives. They just came from the same village, and the older ones cared for the younger ones.

There was no electricity, gas or water plumbing, but such things didn't exist in this world in the first place, so they didn't feel troubled by this. The children could use bottles to collect water from the spring nearby. As for sewage, they could dump it by digging a hole in the corner of the camp. In consideration for hygiene, dirty water was treated with bleach, while potable water was brought to them by Itami's group in plastic bottles.

Out of the three daily meals, lunch and dinner were provided by Itami's group.

As for breakfast, they prepared it themselves with ingredients which were provided to them by the JSDF. In reality, the portions were a bit lacking, so the children and elderly would wander into the forest to find wild herbs to eat. Lunch was type two combat rations while dinner was

a huge pot of soup cooked by Furata and the other team members while they chatted with the children.

If they wanted to, the JSDF could provide all three meals for them, but they didn't so as to preserve their ability to provide for themselves. The JSDF wanted to support them in providing for themselves. Such was the basic principle of the JSDF when they were deployed in Iraq. If they could provide for themselves adequately, the next target would be for them to provide all three meals for themselves. If they could find some work, they might not be able to pay for their accommodations, but they would at least be able to pay for their meals.

That was the plan, but the JSDF wouldn't push them too hard. After all, the residents were two elderly women and one elderly man, two injured middle aged women, one injured man and the other nineteen were children.

By the way, the three injured people suffered fractures, so they couldn't perform manual labour, even though they could care for the children.

The interesting thing was that, Lelei, who was learning to communicate really fast, said that out of the nineteen so called kids, the Goth Loli priestess, the Elven girl and Lelei herself weren't children. So the number of children was actually sixteen.

So, how old were the three of them? The Goth Loli priestess probably wouldn't answer. According to Lelei, she was 'Not a child, but much, much, much older'. When questioned about the exact figure, the expressionless Lelei frowned and shook her head, unwilling to ask.

By the way, Lelei herself was fifteen. In this world she was considered an adult.

Elves have long lifespans that was a common setting in fantasy stories so it was easy to understand. Tuka said she was 165 years old.

They thought numbers would be easy to understand, but it still took a lot of work.

Lelei formed a circle with her thumb and index finger, and only extended her middle finger. If her other three fingers were extended, that would be a sign for 'OK' back on Earth. After that, she clenched her fist with her thumb sticking out, which would normally mean 'good job'.

But in her world, that meant fifteen, which was totally different from Japan. In the end, they used stones to compare the numbers, one was an extended index finger, five was a thumbs up, ten was making a circle with a thumb and index finger... that was the system.

With such a system, they counted to sixty nine. They could count further, but the fingers would cramp and it was impractical, so it was decided to ask about it later. In fact, Lelei learned to count in Japanese before that happened.

When Itami and the others reached the camp, Lelei and the children came out to receive them. When Kurokawa came out, all the children went to her.

The members unloaded potable water, food ingredients, medical supplies, combat rations and daily necessities.

In place of that, two canvas bags the size of pillows were loaded onto the HMV by two slightly older boys. They seemed rather heavy. After

exchanging some words with the boys, Lelei and Tuka got onto the HMV.

Lelei was wearing a light brown hooded poncho in the style of Native Americans. On her feet were moccasins and she held a staff in her hand.

In contrast with her, Tuka wore a green T-shirt, tight fitting jeans and basketball shoes. If not for her long ears, she would look just like a typical high school girl from California. On her back were a bow and a quiver full of arrows.

The boys who brought the luggage returned to the refugee camp, where young boys and girls were working hard.

Midway up Arnus Hill, countless Wyvern carcasses covered the area. According to Kato-sensei, the claws and scales of Wyverns could be crafted into tough defensive equipment. Hence, they were valuable items. The children thus harvested them from the decaying carcasses, washed away the rotting meat and blood and dried them. This was the first time Lelei and Tuka would be going to town to sell these items.

This might be a job they could perform indefinitely. If that was so, it would help them achieve independence.

It wasn't clear what Rory the priestess' intention was, but she also got onto the vehicle. She was still wearing her black gothic dress, holding a halberd that looked really heavy in her hands.

As this was a good chance for Itami and the others to observe the interaction of the residents with the merchants for intel purposes, they offered to provide transport and escort them. Also, Yanagida claimed he

wanted to see what would interest the merchants and came over with some sample merchandise.

On a side note, the dead coalition army soldiers and the corpse of the imperial forces that attacked earlier were all buried along with their weapons, equipment and their money purses by the JSDF.

It was a sizeable amount of wealth... After all, there were no financial institutions in this world, so the soldiers could only keep their money on them. There were also knights and nobles of high status buried here... But there were many ethical issues, so the JSDF couldn't just take them. In fact, this move resulted in a lot of currency in the local economy to disappear, hitting the empire and the surrounding nations hard financially, but these were issues for another time.

As many of the war horses that lost their owners were rounded up as was possible.

It was done out of fear of complaints from animal protection groups, but providing food for such a large number of horses was a problem. The goods left behind by the enemy included horse feed, but it would only be a matter of time before the supply dried up. Arnus Hill was surrounded by barren land, and there was no grass suitable for them to graze on in the forest slightly further away.

And so, finding people to take over the horses was added into Itami's task list.

As for the goods handed to Lelei, there were about two hundred dragon scales and three dragon claws, from just two wyverns.

That was after they sorted out the broken pieces and ones that were too small.

How many scales would they get by processing all the wyverns on Arnus Hill? Just thinking about that made all the refugees, be they young or old, including Kato-sensei, dizzy.

Just asking the refugees to live on independently made the refugees hang their heads in depression.

Be it building houses to live in, farming for food or hunting for games, it would be impossible for the elderly, the injured and the children to accomplish on their own.

When Lelei and Tuka were about to consider whoring themselves, the JSDF told them “we will help you” and gave them food and built homes for them. When they were troubled over finding jobs, they were given a free hand to process valuable items as they desired, allowing them to collect the scales from the wyverns on Arnus Hill.

The scales of ‘dragons’ were actually quite valuable.

It was like telling them to pick as much as they like from a mountain of treasure. Their responses were like “Is this fine? Is this really fine?”

For the villagers and children who lived self-subsistent lives of relative poverty, the massive influx of income allowed them to buy things they once thought were unachievable... They thought about all the ways they could spend it, and they were still asked to take more, to take it all... Sadly, this was beyond the imagination of mere peasants.

Dragon scales could be divided into several categories, the market value would be dependent on the type and condition of the scales.

The highest level would be the scale of dragons, one piece in perfect condition was worth ten Suwani gold coins. Armour made from the red scales of a Flame Dragon (very difficult to craft) would be a legendary treasure, enough money to buy an entire nation. If it really existed.

The next grade would be newborn dragon scales. However, these two types of scales were basically impossible to find in the market. As mentioned earlier, it was impossible for man to hunt dragons. The only way to obtain them was from the skin shed by dragons or newborn dragons during molting. In reality, armour made from dragon scales had made appearances in some tales of heroes and legends, and the item itself was worshipped inside the temple of the god of war.

As for wyverns, nations with wyvern riders had a steady supply of them, so these smaller scales were cheaper. One scale was between thirty to seventy Silver Denari.

If you don't splurge, one Silver Denari could feed a person for five days. So if they sell all two hundred scales, Lelei's group would be rich.

But, they needed a suitable buyer for them.

To trade them for cash safely, Lelei hoped to sell them to a large store. However, she was worried about whether a large store owner would negotiate with a little girl... If a small store couldn't pay that much money, she would have to let them pay at a later date. Even though Lelei was a sage, she wouldn't know about receipts and account transfers.

Fortunately, her master Kato had an acquaintance who was a merchant, they could go there even though it was a bit far. The JSDF would be going with them anyway... And so, Lelei's gaze fell on Itami's group.

"Hmm? What is the matter?"

After locking eyes with Itami and being asked that, Lelei kept her usual poker face and stated the phrase which meant 'nothing'.

"Well then, where is the shop of this Shooto person?"

Tuka and Rory leaned over and asked. Lelei answered straight to the point.

"Italica city, west of Tipilika city, at the foot of Romalia mountain."

"Tipilika city, Romalia mountain, Italica city..."

Sergeant Major Kuwahara had labelled the known landmarks on his map made from aerial photographs. He heard about the name of the places in the vicinity from Lelei, and had basically mapped out the area around Arnus Hill.

"I see, Appian highway, Roma river, Gurlpaz plains, Dima mountain range..."

Lelei seemed to be curious about the map that showed the vicinity in clear detail. The maps she knew would only sketch the hills and rivers, and the map would be considered good if the positions roughly matched. Therefore, it was only natural that she was interested in such a detailed map. Lelei pointed out the places she knew on the map and

stated their names. Another thing that caught her attention was the compass.

Lelei felt the secret of how Kuwahara oriented himself and the map lay in that object.

Kuwahara who was already fifty wondered how much magnetic north deviated from true north in this world as he taught the usage of the compass to Lelei who he was treating like his own daughter. Well, they were sitting in a moving HMMV, so the compass would shake a little anyway.

Kurata stole a glance at Kuwahara from the rear view mirror and muttered, "The old man known as the demon drill sergeant seems really happy when he is with cute young girls."

In the early stage of the sergeant's course, all trainees would have experienced his orders to run with weights, which had built plenty of frustration and anger in Kurata's heart. But all his grudges dissipated like the wind when he saw Kuwahara acting like a grandfather doting on his granddaughter.

Rory and Tuka were talking about something.

They were talking relatively fast in their own language, so Itami and the others couldn't understand. However, they could still tell that Rory was teasing Tuka. In the end, Tuka kept quiet with puffed cheeks. Rory had a mischievous smile as she looked at Kurokawa. Itami was wondering what she wanted to say when Tuka's face and long ears blushed red.

There was clearly something out of place.

Rory laughed heartily, enjoying how Tuka was panicking. Lelei said that Rory was 'Very, very old', but to see Tuka who was 165 years old being treated like a child was odd.

"Commander Itami, smoke ahead, to the right."

Kurata who was driving pointed to the front right.

The exact same report was received via radio, the vehicle ahead also noticed the same thing.

Itami observed the origin of the smoke with binoculars, but couldn't confirm anything as it was quite some distance away. Itami stopped the convoy and asked Kurata, "Hey, will this road lead somewhere near the source of that smoke?"

"The road is heading right towards it."

"Damn. This is the second time that smoke has appeared right in front of us. I have a bad feeling about this."

Itami then asked Kuwahara for his opinion.

Referencing the map, Kuwahara found the city labelled as Italica near the source of the smoke. This convoy heading for Tipilica was moving towards Italica.

Itami handed the binoculars to Lelei and asked for her opinion.

Lelei held it backwards, but changed it after realizing her mistake immediately.

“That is smoke.”

Lelei said in Japanese.

“The reason for the smoke?”

The smart Lelei understood Itami’s question immediately.

“Farmland, burn, no smoke. Season, wrong. Caused by man. Flier? But too big.”

“Not ‘flier’, it’s fire.”

After correcting the mistake, Itami issued his orders.

“Watch our surroundings carefully, we are approaching the city. Keep an eye on the sky.”

Kuwahara and Kurokawa picked up their rifles, covering the left and right respectively. Tuka joined Kurokawa and Lelei helped Kuwahara in observing the surroundings. The convoy moved off once again.

Rory squeezed between Itami and Kurata as she mumbled “Fresh blood” with a lusty smile.

Italica city was founded two hundred years ago by gathering the merchants in the region to construct a fortress city.

Politically speaking, this place was the cross road of the Dressia and Appian highways, and developed as a border city between the nations. But with the expansion of the Empire's borders, its political importance had declined significantly, and it was just a mid sized local market now. It doesn't have any local specialties, but the crops, livestock and handmade products such as cloth would be sent to the capital, so it served as a collection base.

Right now, this was the territory of the Empire's noble family, the clan of Count Formal.

Colt, the head of clan Formal had three daughters, Elle, Loui, and Myui. Aside from the youngest Myui, the other two had been married off to other clans. Colt was planning to find someone to marry into the clan after his youngest grew up to take over the family estate.

Myui was still single, and after Colt and his wife died because of an accident, misfortune started to befall the city.

The eldest daughter Elle and the second daughter Loui married into the Count Roen clan and the Count Missna clan respectively, so Myui had the right of succession over them. This was the law of the Empire and there were no grounds for them to dispute. However, the youngest Myui was only eleven, so whoever became her guardian... would become the de facto leader. And so, the power struggle began.

The talks between the two elder sisters started as a calm discussion and turned into ugly quarrels, pulling each others' hair in scuffles, and even went so far as involving their husbands. The soldiers of Count Roen and Count Missna fought a small scale war as a result.

But their fight did not escalate further. They had limited forces after all, and the husbands weren't blind with rage like their wives were.

The security within the territory was maintained by the vassals of Count Formal and the soldiers of Count Roen and Count Missna, so there wasn't any threat to the livelihood of the merchants and residents. The value of Italica lay with its trade, there would be nothing to gain if it was laid to waste.

And so, the situation became a stalemate.

The dispute of the sisters shifted into the courts of the capital, and Myui's guardian would soon be decided by the deliberation of the Emperor.

However, the situation worsened after the empire's campaign against the other world.

The heads of the Roen and Missna clans died in battle. Elle and Louise couldn't spare the effort to take care of the Formal territory anymore and withdrew their forces, leaving Myui with the vassals of Count Formal.

The young Myui couldn't control her vassals and the running of the territory became ineffective from neglect. There weren't many loyal vassals left, but there were plenty who had ulterior motives. Before she realized it, corruption and injustice were running rampant.

The citizens were wary and security deteriorated.

Loose bands of soldiers turned to banditry and started attacking caravans, grinding trade to a halt and stagnating the movement of resources.

Bandits and trolls formed a group together and numbered in the hundreds. Finally, Italica city itself was attacked.

Standing over the city gate, Piña loosed a few arrows at the retreating bandits and took a deep breath.

Wounded soldiers staggered around or collapsed from blood loss. Arrows were shot into the stone walls and the surrounding area was a mess. She spotted several citizens holding farm tools and sticks with a glance.

Outside the wall, the corpses of bandits and carcasses of horses were scattered all over the ground.

“Norma! Hamilton! Are you alright?”

Inside the broken gate, Norma was defending a barricade. He supported his body by putting his weight on a sword, his shoulders rising up and down as he panted. He lifted a hand to signal that he was well, but his armour was covered with arrows and signs of being hit by a sword.

His surroundings showed evidence of an intense battle, with bodies from the attacking bandits and defending soldiers everywhere.

As for Hamilton, she was already sitting on the ground.

Her legs were straightened with her palms supporting her body, barely keeping herself from keeling over. Her grip on her sword was loose.

“Anyway, hah hah, I am, hah hah, alive.”

“What about me, princess? How cold!”

“Grey! Of course you will be fine, that’s why I didn’t ask.”

“Should I be happy? Or sad?”

Grey, a man who looked about forty with a stout build, showed no hint of fatigue as he rested his sword on his shoulders.

There wasn’t any blood on him. If there wasn’t any blood on his sword, he had probably been hiding somewhere, which would explain why he still looked so energetic. He was the Knight Grey Co Aldo, a veteran of the battlefield who rose through the ranks.

In Piña’s knight order, most of the knights were nobles. Since the knight order didn’t have any real battle experience, such veterans were the real core of the unit.

The path to knighthood was narrow for soldiers. However, they would be treated like normal officers after they made it through.

Hamilton said with a complaining tone, “Princess, why are we fighting with marauders here?”

It was a bit rude, but she had to say it out loud.

“It can’t be helped! I thought the army from the other world would attack Italica! Don’t you all agree?”

After completing her investigation of the areas around Arnus, Piña heard some news as she was planning to infiltrate Arnus Hill.

“A large armed group appeared in Count Formal’s territory, and is planning to attack Italica.”

After hearing this news, Piña thought the army from the other world had finally started their invasion. ‘Are they sending out forces to suppress the surrounding territories before laying siege to the imperial capital?’, she thought.

She had to take countermeasures then. For Piña, instead of meaningless reconnaissance, an elegant battle suited her better. She pulled out of Arnus, ordered her knights to head for Italica, while she and her group rushed there in advance.

No matter what kind of battle it was, not knowing the scale and battle potential of the enemy would be useless. If the enemy forces were limited, she would defend Italica and attack with a pincer attack with her knights that would arrive later.

However, she soon realized the ones attacking Italica were a marauding band. Most of the members were remnants of the former Coalition Army.

In contrast, the head of clan Formal in charge of the city’s defences was just eleven.

She couldn't command in battle, and morale was at its lowest.

Piña was disheartened, but she couldn't stand idle and watch the bandits ravage the city. So she revealed her identity to the clan and forcefully took over command of the Countess' soldiers in defence of Italica.

"If we can hold for three days, my knights will be here."

To be honest, they might arrive even later than that.

But the citizens and the countess' troops believed in Piña and fought with all they had. The enemy might be the remnants of a defeated army, but they were former soldiers and proficient in attacking fortresses.

The city didn't fall, but the gate that was supposed to be solid was destroyed, granting the enemy entry. With the help of the citizens and militia fighting with their farm tools, they survived the first day, but it felt like a defeat.

They had lost too much.

The small number of troops decreased, and the courageous ones of the militia fell in battle. What remained were casualties and exhausted soldiers. Just one day was enough to plummet the morale of the soldiers and citizens to rock bottom. Piña couldn't think of anything to raise their spirits.

That was how her first battle ended.

## Chapter 9

Piña Co Lada was the daughter of Emperor Molt Sol Augustus and his concubine, the Countess Nell.

Emperor Molt had eight acknowledged children. She was the fifth among them, and the third among the daughters. By the way, if one included the illegitimate children, she would have about 12 to 15 siblings.

Because she was a legitimate daughter of the Emperor, Piña had a place in the imperial succession. However, she was 10th in line (the Emperor's brother was ahead of her) so hardly anyone saw her as an heir to the throne. At a suitable age, she would most likely be married off to a foreign king or an influential noble. It was not glamorous, but she would at least enjoy a comfortable life.

However, her existence was like a storm blowing through the upper crust of society, though that was more because of her personality than for political reasons. When she was young, she would often get angry over small things and play over-the-top pranks, which disturbed the people around her.

When she was 12, she settled down, and began playing "The Knight Game" with an all-noble cast.

According to popular gossip, she had been influenced after seeing a female actress in a play. There was no way of telling if that was the truth, but something had happened back then.

After claiming an old but sturdy building at the edge of the capital, she gathered several noble children and made them live as if they were part of the military, with herself as their commander. Because it was a game of soldiers played as a group, they messed up a lot and didn't have proper food or uniforms. However, even when they failed, everything seemed new, so the children had fun with it.

At first the adults were worried. But as they watched them and saw they were happy, the adults calmed down and decided to wait until they got tired of the game and came home.

In the end, the kids went home after two days, and their parents welcomed them back by asking “Did you have fun?”

Piña’s talent for leadership had developed here. This was because she could see that, herself included, they were all far too weak.

She also realized that her colleagues would get tired of the game after two days, and would want to go home after three days. Therefore, she let everyone go back early, so they would continue thinking “It was fun”, and then they would be more likely to play another round of “The Knight Game”.

A week later, she started a second “Knight Game”.

They used the same building as last time, but this time she brought cooks and servants, so the food, clothes and living conditions were far different from before. When they saw this, it reassured the parents and the children.

And just like that, this round of “The Knight Game” began in a comfortable environment.

Although it was called a game, it was still a military affair.

Therefore, when the kids came back, the parents were heard to say things like “Their words and movements are much more refined than before”, “They’ve become sociable and made good friends”, “They’re stronger and more energetic”, “They aren’t picky about their food any more”, “They’re living their lives correctly”. The Imperial Princess’ “Knight Game” had shown a positive influence on their children. And as they played more “Knight Games”, some of the noble parents even provided their own funding and encouraged their children to take part.

Piña's comrades during this time were called the first batch. The first batch made the rules, and they were the models for oaths, various rituals, and ranks for the rest of the recruits.

Training up an order of knights took about two years, and when Piña was around 14, what they called "basic training" was a period of cohabitation of around two to three months. Schooling became part of their training, and they invited several imperial scholars to conduct lessons, so as not to neglect their education. The children's' parents saw this "Knight Game" as a form of "young people's education" in the form of training for a knight order.

If this was where the "Knight Games" had ended, it would have been seen as a meaningful endeavour which would have its place in the Empire's history books. After all, it made children more independent, taught a healthy and regimented lifestyle, encouraged filial piety, treated everyone as fellow brothers and sisters (in truth, many of the children swore oaths of brotherhood or sisterhood with each other). The adults were pleased with this sort of "Knight Game".

Similar youth groups sprang up across the country, and it was around this time that these youth groups began styling themselves after knight orders as well.

However, Piña ultimately wanted to develop this into a proper military unit.

When she was fifteen, her knight group started incorporating the basics of physical training, swordsmanship, archery, and horsemanship into their training, and they also brought in outside coaches, officers and NCOs from the Imperial Army.

The mood of the personnel ordered to assist in this varied. Those close to retirement were pleased, but the younger officers and NCOs were upset

that they were just playing around with the Imperial Princess in a “Knight Game”.

Therefore, with the mindset of “We can’t keep playing games with them”, they began a program of serious military education. And this was what Piña had hoped for.

The officers were hoping that the kids be unable to take it and that they would quit, but Piña believed that everyone could endure this round of training.

In this way, the military organization of the whole thing began taking shape. Their theory and practice during their training was no less than what actual army units were learning, and the members of Piña’s knight group soon became excellent soldiers and grew rapidly.

When Piña was 16, something important happened which pushed her knight group forward.

The boys graduated.

Those young noblemen who were not in the upper crust wanted to become soldiers and officers in the future. Since they had grown up in a group that valued martial valor, all of them wanted to become soldiers, and Piña could not stop them from going.

With the words, “As one of the original knight group, go and be a knight who does us proud”, she bade those young men farewell.

Now, the knight group’s core was largely composed of women. Because they had to learn to be good brides, the female members had to leave the knight group too. However, some stayed behind, and there were new recruits too.

Because there were more applicants this time round, the knight group grew larger.

In the next three years, when the young men from the knight group began excelling as junior officers, their achievements drew the attention of the high-ranking officers.

When the knight group graduated... when the roses bloomed... commanders from various armies came looking for future subordinates. However, their eyes were on the male graduates, since there was no place for females in the military.

Because of that, Piña decided to form a proper knight band, composed mostly of females and some males (mostly higher-ranked noble boys and some experienced veterans Piña picked herself), and with some additional troops, they became the “Order of the Rose Knights”.

The “Order of the Rose Knights” received the blessing of noble society and the court, but for the most part they played the part of honor guards, guardians for noblewomen, and ceremonial occasions, but they had no combat experience.

And then, things in the Empire changed.

Things being as they were, the Order of the Rose Knights could no longer languish in the rear echelons. Under the command of Piña, who thirsted for actual combat, they raised flags of red, white and yellow roses, and marched down the Appian Way.

They could hardly bear to look upon Italica as it was besieged by bandits.

Arrows rained upon the city from the outside, past the city walls and onto the outer ring of houses. The bodies of the bandits and the defenders of Italica littered the ground on both sides of the city walls, and the ground was painted scarlet with dried blood.

Those men who still had strength were rushing back and forth to put out fires. The small ones could be extinguished with water, but the buildings burning in earnest had to be abandoned.

The women tried to help the moderately- or critically-injured, while the children collected scattered weapons and arrows.

The lightly-injured people buried the dead, using shovels to dig mass graves in the outskirts of the city. Normally, they would have buried them properly, but there were too many corpses, so they did away with the ceremony and just put them in the ground. The bandits' bodies were simply dumped into a deep ditch.

In this way, the soldiers, the merchants, the barmaids, the men, the women, the elderly, the children, everyone in the city came out to help. Anyone would be tired if they had to keep working like this amidst the pitched battle of the afternoon.

"Your Highness... may we, may we take a break?"

An old man, who represented the citizens, asked that of the supervising Piña in a small voice.

Everyone looked tired, and she understood their feelings. However, now they had to quickly bury the dead, put out the burning houses and clock towers, as well as repairing the city gates and barricades.

Piña knew the importance of these things, and so she turned an annoyed look onto the old man asking for a rest.

"The bandits haven't given up yet. Once they rally themselves, they'll immediately attack again. We can't count on destroyed city gates and barricades to protect us; it'll be even more tiring."

"But, but..."

The old man must have thought Piña was being an unreasonable tyrant. Their positions and perspectives were different. It would seem that expecting them to understand was a naive dream she had.

"I'm not asking you. This is an order."

"Gray, how are the city gates, can we fix them?"

Gray, who was keeping track of the gate's condition, turned to Piña.

"Your Highness, in my opinion, it is beyond repair. The bolt is completely destroyed,"

"Then what should we do?"

"Why not tear it down and jam up the entrance?"

They could enter and leave via the small side doors. After all, they would not be moving carriages and wagons through the main gate. If they could open the side doors to move in and out, then blocking up the main entrance ought to be fine.

"Good. Make it so."

Gray directed the citizens to gather their sturdy furniture and pile it against the gate.

"They might burn it down. Will that be all right?"

Gray shrugged and said that if it started burning, they might as well toss more wood in.

Piña thought about it, and nodded. After all, a burning fence was a great barrier.

Piña looked back, and raised her head to the top of the wall.

“Norma! How’s your side?”

On top of the wall, Norma was surveying the outside with a bow in hand. He looked back and replied, “No enemies so far!”

“Stay alert, don’t slack off. Who knows when they’ll come back.”

Norma nodded, ignoring the rills of blood flowing down his forehead, and ordered his subordinates to keep their eyes peeled.

“Come, come, you should be hungry, right? We’ve prepared food.”

The speaker was one of the maids from the Count’s household, who was driving a wagon with a big pot on it. She brought milk and barley porridge, as well as black bread. Neither was particularly delicious, but an empty stomach was the best seasoning for poor food.

Piña was struck by the smell of the food and felt that working while hungry wouldn’t help things so she ordered them to eat in shifts. Afterwards, she felt that she should eat too, and so she went to Count Formal’s home.

Because the guards and other men were out guarding the city walls, the Count’s home was practically devoid of people, and she was not greeted by anyone.

However, not everyone was gone. There were several large cauldrons in the residence’s courtyard, filled with barley porridge or baking black bread. All the maids were helping out.

In the end, someone came to greet Piña. It was the Count’s old butler and the head maid.

“Your Highness, welcome.”

"Mm. Forgive me, but do you have anything to eat or drink?"

As she finished speaking to the head maid, Piña sat on the sofa like it was her own home.

The butler who stood by the side poured a silver goblet of wine for Piña.

"Your Highness, it seems we are saved."

"Not yet. Those fellows will come by for another round."

"Must we fight them? Maybe we could negotiate."

"You want to avoid a fight? Simple. Open the gate and give them all your money and food."

The old butler, who was averse to combat, sighed as he heard Piña speak.

"After they plunder everything you have, they'll kill all the men. The young women will be taken as slaves, but before that, they'll probably... no, they'll definitely be violated. And the bandits will probably want to gang-rape pretty girls like me. I could handle one, maybe two, but I don't think I could stay sane after 50 or 100. What do you think will happen to Myui-sama then?"

"M-Myui-sama is only eleven years old!"

"Who knows, some of the bandits might like them young... or no, they'll definitely have some sick freaks like that among them. So, do you want to pray that there aren't and open the gates to them?"

Sweat poured down the butler's head, and he whined:

"Your, Your Highness. Please, please don't scare me."

“Then all we can do is fight, right? Trying to negotiate with these animals is pointless. That is a path to destruction. All we can do is grit our teeth and resist to the bitter end.”

Piña gulped down the wine.

With a satisfied “Whew!”, she helped herself to the black bread and barley porridge. However, after a mouthful, she frowned.

“So little and it’s bland too?”

The head maid sternly shook her head and spoke: “Your Highness, when one is fatigued, their stomachs will be weak as well. Consuming rich foods in that condition will only do harm to one’s body.”

Piña accepted the head maid’s comments without complaint. Come to think of it, the Count’s maids were making food without any sign of fear, and she herself did not remembering ordering them to do so. Whose instructions were those? She could tell that the old butler was a lily-livered coward. Then, was it the old maid?

As she thought about this, Piña asked the old maid a question.

“Have you been through something like this before?”

“I once lived in the town of Rosa.”

The town of Rosa had once been attacked by the Empire. Although they beat back the Imperial Army, their government collapsed and they were finally taken by the Empire. It was now a ruin.

That maid must have been in Rosa during that battle. Warfare was not limited to bows, magic and swords. Raising morale, distributing weapons and rations were also ways to fight.

In that sense, the old maid was a combat veteran.

The lady of the house was young, and could not be counted on. So the reason why the maids could soldier on without panicking must have been because of the old maid.

Piña ate until she was nearly full, and wiped her mouth with a napkin.

“Then, I shall go rest in a guest room. If anything happens, bring the messenger directly to me.”

As she finished speaking to the old maid, a playful gleam came into Piña’s eye and she decided to mess with her.

“What would you do if I did not wake up?”

Said the old maid: “Why, I would dump water on your head and invite you to rise.”

She had a very creepy smile on her face.

Piña laughed, and said she wasn’t interested in bathing in bed as she headed to the guest room.

However, in the end it was the feeling of cold water on her face that woke her up.

As she wiped her face, she angrily donned her armor over her wet clothes.

“What happened? Is it the enemy?”

Gray felt that Piña’s drenched red hair looked exceptionally fetching, but he held his tongue because of the emergency. Instead, he began his report.

“We don’t know if they’re friend or foe.”

As the unknown party approached, the battle-ready soldiers and civilians peeked at them from crenellations in the city walls or the gaps in the roadblocks.

“Your Highness, you can get a good view from here.”

A farmer holding a steel hoe made a small hole in one of the roadblocks.

Through the small viewing aperture she saw what looked like four-wheeled wagons... but they were not pulled by horses or cows.

Piña knew about siege weapons called “covered wagons”, which were essentially giant boxes pushed along by horses, cattle or soldiers from the inside. She wondered if the three vehicles in front were covered wagons.

On closer inspections, their wheels seemed to be made of some kind of cloth or leather.

If that were the case, even if they could stop arrow fire, boiling water or molten lead, they could not avoid being smashed by heavy rocks. The troublesome one would be the vehicle in the back. It did not look like it was made of wood, but rather, it was sheathed in metal.

There were people inside that “armored wagon”. The roof seemed to have something like an arbalest on top of it, and it seemed protected against arrows or thrown rocks.

Still, however exquisite their weapons were, weapons alone could not take a city.

Siege weapons were meaningful because they were used to take the city. However, she could see no enemies within her field of view. They did not seem to want to break down the roadblocks either.

If the siege weapons were there to lower morale, they should be making threatening moves, but they did nothing of the sort, so she could not tell what the other side wanted.

“Norma?!”

“No other enemies.”

Norma replied as though he knew what Piña was going to say.

There were spotty... no, they wore dark green clothing with brown and light green splotches, and similarly colored cloth helmets on their heads.

It was hard to tell if they were carrying weapons or magic staves, but from their stern expressions and sharp glares, these people had power that could not be ignored.

“Friend or foe?! If you are a friend, then come out!”

Norma shouted loudly, while Piña, Italica’s defenders and the citizens all held their breath.

After a while, the back door of one of the covered wagons opened.

A girl emerged from it. She seemed to be 13 to 15 years old. Judging by the long robe and the magic staff she was carrying, she was instantly recognizable as a mage.

The staff seemed to be made of wood... which meant she was an orthodox mage of the Lindon school. If that was the case, she should be skilled with attack spells and spell combat despite her young age.

In the previous attack, the bandits had not fielded any mages. That might have been why the defenders could hold out as long as they did, but if the bandits now had a mage on their side, the battle would be much harder.

Piña clucked her tongue as she thought about the difficult battle that lay ahead.

The next to alight was a girl of around 16, wearing strange clothes.

Her clothes clung to her frame, showing off the curves of her body. Because the clothes were a little too small, they exposed the snow-white skin of her back and belly, setting the men's imagination afire.

As a woman, Piña felt that she had correctly divined the purpose of those clothes.

The problem was this girl's long, pointed ears. She was an elf, with blonde hair and blue eyes.

No good... the enemy had Elves in addition to mages. She heard that Elves were, without exception, excellent spirit-summoners. Of note were those who could summon the wind spirits to create bolts of lightning that could wipe out an entire platoon. Even a full knight company would have trouble defeating both a Lindon-style mage and an Elf using spirit magic.

Should she try taking them down while they were off guard? Sniping them with bows might work...

While she thought of ways to take down the two of them, after she saw the girl alight from the vehicle, her damp clothes suddenly turned ice cold.

She wore priest's clothing, made of black silk and edged in lace.

She was a young girl who wore a headdress of black gauze over her black hair.

"That, that's Rory... Mercury!"

She was an agent of the god of death, judgement, madness and war — an Apostle of Emroy.

Because the Emperor counted as the highest religious official in the Empire, he could speak with Apostles during national religious events. As such, she had the chance to see the Apostles of the god Emroy, which was why Piña could recognize her.

“Is that the legendary Rory the Reaper? Although it’s the first time I’ve seen her, she looks like the young lady in the Count’s residence...”

Indeed, Rory looked much younger than the mage girl and the Elf girl.

However, her slender limbs were easily holding a halberd that looked heavier than herself, and she thumped it into the earth as she came.

“Don’t be fooled by her looks, she’s a monster that’s over 900 years old.”

Before the Empire was formed, while this world was in chaos, there were already unaging “demigods”, called Apostles. Even so, Rory was the second youngest among these Apostles.

An Apostle, a mage and an Elf... Piña would rather flee than think of fighting the three of them.

“However, what’s an Apostle of Emroy doing with a bunch of bandits?”

Piña shook her head at Gray’s question.

“You can’t judge these people like that.”

Normal human values did not apply to Apostles. They cared nothing for the Emperor or the Senate’s laws, or even the thing called justice. It might not be wrong to say they sneered at them.

That was Piña's worried explanation.

"Whether the Gods exist has nothing to do with good or evil. People pray to them, but bad things still happen. One can get sick even if one lives a virtuous life and a cruel tyrant can still live a long time. All these have nothing to do with prayer or reverence.

Gods are beings that humans can't understand. Or rather, humans can't understand the motivations of the Gods... and some people say the Gods must be crazy."

After hearing Piña's thoughts, Gray's brow was slick with sweat. He muttered, "If her Holiness hears that, we'll be in trouble..."

"Oh yes. These people style themselves as the Gods' messengers. If you say Gods are completely insane and incomprehensible, then there's no purpose for them to exist."

In a polytheistic world, the faiths did not differentiate between good, evil, orthodoxy or heresy. If one tired of one god, then one could worship another. However, the priesthood was a religious organization that enjoyed certain privileges and power. Anyone who denigrated the gods would become a target for them.

"I didn't hear that, I didn't hear that..."

Gray shook his head at Piña from behind her. Then, Piña peered outside through the gap.

"Oh... they're here."

She looked to the front of the gate once more. The mage girl was approaching them.

## Chapter 10

There was a disturbance at Italica's main gate.

Usually, the traffic here would be flowing briskly, and between the merchants and the taxmen they had to deal with, the area would be very lively. However, that bustle was nowhere to be seen today. A pile of wood and furniture blocked the main gate, denying all who would enter.

On top of the city wall, which was three stories tall, the sentries were lining up and pointing their crossbows at them.

They had even installed a polybolos, which could release multiple bolts in sequence.

In addition, they had many things that were difficult to imagine as weapons. For instance, there were steaming cauldrons, suspended over fires.

If it were located by a river or on a mountain top, one might think it was a cookpot for a witch. But on top of a city wall, there was no way to think it was there to prepare food.

"I hope they don't decide to give us a bath..."

Kurata, who was driving the HMV, muttered those words. Itami thought, they *can't hear you*. In variety TV shows, the "bath" in question was little more than a harmless prop, but in reality, it was a horrible device on par with chemical weapons.

Dying from being scalded to death by hot water would be a long and painful way to go.

Being scalded by hot water over much of the body would cause the formation of full-body blisters and a consequent loss of body fluids, leading to dehydration. If that was not enough to kill a person, the loss of skin would also invite infection. The dead tissues would then rot and lead to sepsis, plunging the victim into terrible pain. Even if they somehow survived, they would bear the scars and agony for life.

If he had known that this was not water, but rather molten lead, Itami would have ordered an immediate retreat because he was keenly aware of the stories where people tried to kill themselves by self-immolating, but somehow managed to survive after incredible suffering.

Italica's defenders used weapons that were quite different from those of Itami and his colleagues. They were sharp, or hot, and at a glance one could call them "implements for murder".

The term "killing intent" came up often in TV serials, light novels, or manga, but Itami had never felt that sort of thing during his life in modern society. Perhaps one could only sense these things after becoming a martial arts master. What he could feel, right now, was a sense of pain or heat whenever he looked at those things. In addition to the caution coming from the defenders, he could feel eyes filled with murderous intent fixed on them.

"Friend or foe?! If you are a friend, then come out!"

Although he didn't know the meaning of those words being shouted from above him, he could tell from their tone. He whispered to Lelei, "Doesn't sound like a welcome. Should we try another city?"

“The people in the town look very busy too, so it looks like we can’t discuss things with them properly. Although I don’t know what they’ll be fighting against, I don’t want to be involved in it. Frankly speaking, my safety and yours is my top priority. What do you think?”

“Yeah, they’re dying to have us in there.”

As Kurata grumbled from the passenger seat, Sergeant Major Kuwabara said over the wireless, “If they don’t move, we don’t move”. The two of them had their rifles in hand and carefully aimed them outside.

However, Lelei used her usual blank expression and steady voice to say, “Rejected”.

“But we can’t get in while they’re like this.”

“There are other entrances. Italica is a plains city. There will be gates on the north, south, east and west. There’s no way that there’s no other way in.”

“Itami, you wait first. I’ll go over there to talk to them.”

With that, Lelei made to stand. However, Tuka immediately stopped her and told her to wait.

Tuka, like Itami, wanted to know why they had to go to this town.

Although she wasn’t afraid like Itami was, when one thought about it, there was no benefit to getting involved with a town under siege. There was a chance they might be pulled into the conflict... well, if they entered the town, they would definitely be involved.

Lelei replied to her: "It's not a question of entering the town, but I want to let them know we're not enemies. If we leave like this, they will think we're part of the enemy forces. If we come back in the future, or go to other towns, that news will spread. It'll be inconvenient."

"However, are you going to pull these people into it because of us?"

Tuka gestured to Itami, Kurokawa and the others as she spoke.

"They helped us without asking for repayment. Shouldn't we keep them out of danger?"

"That's why I'm going. We've received a lot of kindness from Itami and the others, so I don't want them to think that Itami and the rest are enemies."

"Are you doing this for Itami?"

"Yes. After all, he and the others own this special riding carriage."

Tuka had to nod as she heard this.

"It'll be fine. We'll just say we came to do business and that we're confirming the situation."

"I understand. However, I can't let you go alone. You need protection from arrows."

As Tuka said that, she began chanting a spell in the language of the fairies.

Almost immediately, they could feel the motion of the wind.

And so, Lelei, Tuka and Rory exited the vehicle.

“Itami, you should wait here.”

After repeating that line, the three of them slowly approached the main gate.

The points of the sentries’ crossbow bolts tracked them as they approached.

As Itami saw this, he felt uneasy even though they had told him to wait. His mind was filled with thoughts like, “As a man, as a soldier, as a human being,” and so on.

All he could do was watch.

Though Itami appeared to be frozen in fear, what he felt was actually pride, or something similar.

Of course, most adults would not say “it’s my honour”, but would deceive themselves with words like “the mission” or “our duty”. However, Itami had always been very honest in this aspect, and he quietly said, “I hate scary things, but I hate losing face too...”

After clucking his tongue loudly, he left his Type 64 rifle in the vehicle, carefully secured the heavy No. 2 bulletproof vest on his body, and got out of the HMTV.

By the way, they were all equipped like the troops in Iraq.

He had a pistol strapped to his thigh, but he left his rifle behind because he did not want to appear threatening by carrying a weapon-like object.

“I’m going over too. Frankly speaking, I have to go. Let me go.”

“Nobody’s stopping you, are they?”

After freezing for a few seconds, Itami said, “Sergeant-Major Kuwabara, I’ll leave the rest to you. If anything happens, come over and help”. With that, he jogged over to Lelei and the others.

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Piña was forced to make a decision.

She had no basis for her decision, but she had to decide anyway. This would be a big gamble.

“Gray, what should we do?”

Even the experienced Gray could not answer Piña’s question. Nobody could guarantee the outcome, and under these conditions, the need to make a big decision like this turned into an immense source of stress. This was called the “Chains of Commanding”.

The soldiers gripped their weapons, awaiting Piña’s decision.

The bowmen's hands trembled as they drew their strings taut.

The farmers waited with their metal farming implements.

The sword-bearing soldiers, the people of Italica, all their lives rested on her decisions.

To begin with, would the Apostle of Emroy, Rory Mercury, as well as an Elf and a mage, actually join a group of bandits?

The answer... was "no". She wanted it to be "no".

As for why... well, if they had been part of the bandits from the start, they would have taken part in the first attack and Italica would have fallen long ago.

However, Rory and the others might not have been with the bandits from the beginning. They might have been waiting for the right time to join in. She could not conclude that they were not part of the bandits just because they did not take part in the first attack.

And if they were not part of the bandits, then why had Rory and the others come to Italica? Why had they come to a town under siege?

She should just deny them entry, but that might turn them into enemies.

Piña wanted Rory and friends on her side. After all, the townspeople and soldiers would be certain of victory with an Apostle of Emroy, an Elf and a mage on their side.

She sensed that she lacked the leadership skills to make her men certain of their victory.

Although she wasn't sure why Rory and the others had come, if she could talk them into joining, then she could tell the residents, "Help is here!"

No, there was no time for long discussions. She had to make them her allies.

Either that, or forbid them entry. She had two choices.

As Piña was thinking of what to do, the sound of knocking came from the outside of the gate.

She held her breath.

Then, Piña gulped, and made a decision. She would use her imposing demeanor to pin down the other party and drag them over to her side.

The thrice-bolted gate was forcefully and powerfully thrust open.

"You're here at last!"

After feeling a dull thudding sensation through her hands, Piña saw Rory, the Elf girl, and the mage looking at a man who was collapsed in front of the door.

His eyes had rolled up in his head and he had lost consciousness.

Immediately, the three of them stared coldly at Piña.

“Could it be... that... that was my fault?”

The white-clad mage, the black-clad priestess, and the blonde, blue-eyed Elf nodded as one.

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Rory and Lelei knew it was just an accident, so they did not blame Piña, but instead they went to help the unconscious Itami.

Itami was a big guy, and he was wearing a heavy suit of armor. With the help of the others, they managed to drag him into town. Then, they thought of removing his clothes to help him breathe.

First, they should remove the thing on his head. After that, they wanted to take his shirt off, but what they thought was a cloth shirt turned out to have metal plates in it. The shirt was mysterious in more than just its appearance, and they had no idea where to start. They decided to try and loosen his collar.

Rory put Itami’s head in her lap, while Tuka took a water canteen from his belt.

The sentries and townspeople gathered round to ask, “What’s going on?”

Piña choked up and could not answer.

Lelei used all the knowledge she had to begin diagnosing Itami.

She peeled his eyelids open to check on his eyeballs, then looked at his nose, ears and mouth to check for bleeding or injury, palpated his face and head to see if there were any hidden injuries, and after making sure he was all right she breathed a sigh of relief.

After that, she finally looked at Piña with accusing eyes.

“What were you trying to do?!”

However, the first to speak was not Lelei, but Tuka.

As she poured the canteen’s water on Itami’s head, she scolded Piña for opening the door so forcefully when she knew someone was on the other side.

She even went so far as to say rude things like “Dumber than a Goblin”, but Piña knew that it was her fault for being careless, so she remained silent, an apologetic expression on her face. She looked nothing like an Imperial Princess now.

When people got angry, the people around them would either get excited or become even calmer. Lelei was now very calm, and she seemed to have realized she was now in Italica.

With a glance, she realized the exit was shut and the bolt was in place. The guards and the townspeople had gathered around them.

She couldn’t help glancing at Rory... but the black-clad priestess simply smiled in amusement.

Itami recovered consciousness after a while.

“Owie,” he said as he rubbed his chin, while opening his eyes. It was then that he realized the face of Rory, the black-clad priestess, now filled his field of vision.

Her black hair grazed across Itami’s face. It was a little prickly.

She looked very young, but her expression was like a mature woman who was very experienced with playing around. He couldn’t tell if she was joking with him or being serious. Her hands held Itami’s head and moved it to her thigh. There was a bewitching beauty in her black pupils.

“Ara~ he’s awake.”

The words came from this world, but he could understand them easily. Plus, Rory’s voice was like the tinkling of silver bells, and pleased his ears.

“Do you remember everything?”

Itami nodded.

The door that had suddenly flung open smashed into his face and jaw, and everything had gone black. It would seem he had passed out for a while.

As he opened his eyes further, behind Rory's face... a lot of people were looking at Itami, and he saw Lelei's worried face.

Suddenly, he heard Tuka scolding someone angrily.

He had been furiously studying this world's language, but now he did not need a translator to understand the words around him. The language center in his brain must have made certain connections, probably caused by being bashed in the head.

The No.2 bulletproof vest was heavy, so Itami only managed to rise with great effort.

For some reason, his upper body was soaked.

As Tuka was halfway through her scolding, she seemed to realize Itami had gotten up and she asked, "Are you alright?"

"Yup. I've let you see an embarrassing side of me."

Itami pulled up the zipper on his shirt and did up the buttons of his bulletproof vest.

After that, he retrieved his helmet from Lelei and tidied his messed-up gear.

He heard Sergeant-Major Kuwabara trying to reach him, and pressed the switch on his lower chest.

"Lieutenant, are you okay? I was worried."

“Kind of, yeah. I passed out for a bit.”

“If you had waited any longer, I would have ordered our guys to burst in.”

Being able to avoid an unnecessary battle was a form of good fortune. It would be terrible if they left behind casualties because of this. Kuwabara had waited so long because such thoughts were on his mind. The need to rescue a captured comrade and the need to avoid a needless fire fight. It was hard for him to decide which to prioritize.

“I’ll contact you again once I figure out what’s going on. Stand by for now.”

“Got it.”

“All right then, who’s going to tell me what’s going on?”

Itami was addressing the people around him.

Rory looked at Tuka, Tuka looked at Lelei, Lelei looked at Piña, and Piña looked pleadingly to everyone around her. In the end, they all looked away, uneasy looks on their faces.

**Was it lukewarm or confused...? Well, the best word for their mood at that moment might be “leisurely**

## Chapter 11

The officers of the JGSDF Special Region Expeditionary Force Headquarters, most of them field-grade, were heatedly debating each other. If things went poorly, it might even break out into a fistfight.

Hazama looked at his subordinates, and thought that they had probably held it in for a long time.

Many members of the JGSDF Special Region Expeditionary Force were bored and restless. After all, there had been nothing for them to do after they came here.

For example, there were the tasks they were doing now, which would be base defense, dispatching small recon teams to gather information for future planning, fine tuning the unit's operational standards, all of which were largely administrative tasks.

As for base defense, there had only been a few live engagements in total, and the enemy's movements and strength were completely unknown.

So under normal circumstances, they would maintain perimeter security, build up the base, or maintain their personal equipment.

As such, the responsibility for defending the base was given to the 5th Combat Group, while the offensively-oriented 1st and 4th Combat Groups repeated their combat drills day after day in the base.

By the way, the 2nd and 3rd Combat Groups were not on this side of the "Gate", while the 6th Combat Group and beyond were not fully formed yet.

At the present time, the Ministry of Defense was slowly rearranging troop deployments, citing that there was no need to mobilize everyone since they were not planning a full-scale invasion. The additional mention of “operational budget” silenced all dissent.

These restless men must have been intensely jealous after hearing that a certain recon team had “Encountered a dragon”, and “Defeated a dragon and saved innocent civilians”.

In the homeland, where life was peaceful and nothing of mention was happening, they could endure it. However, this side of the “Gate” was a battlefield, and the artillery and anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) teams could be proud of their showing in battle, while the infantrymen eagerly discussed the tension before firing and the feeling of pulling a trigger. The engineers, on the other hand, were busy building walls and roads, and their uniforms were constantly stained with mud.

And yet, some people were given missions where they could win glory, while they themselves...

Their twisted feelings, combined with the daily boredom of the 1st and 4th Combat Groups’ lives, rotted the men’s hearts. The officers who led these men had been infected by their restlessness as well.

And then, like manna from heaven, Itami’s request for reinforcements came in.

The personnel who got word of this were overjoyed, and naturally there was a noisy and boisterous response from the troops.

Itami’s request could be summarized thusly:

①Within the past month, a group of deserters from the enemy armed forces' central command has committed acts of plunder, violence, arson and wanton murder within the Italica domain. Several villages have fallen prey to them and many lives have been lost.

3rd Recon Platoon was attacked while attempting to visit the town of Italica. The defenders have tried their best to mount a defensive battle, but losses have been heavy. A second large-scale attack is coming soon.

By the request of the town's representative, Piña Co Lada, we have accepted the duty of providing security and protection for the local population. Please send help immediately.

②The deserters from the enemy's armed forces' central command, also known as "bandits", are heavily-armed by the standards of the Special Region. We have confirmed the presence of cavalry, infantry and bowmen in numbers exceeding 600. The exact abilities of their mages are unknown.

③The city has no ability to eliminate these "bandits", and although the local authorities as represented by Count Formal's family have already submitted a request for reinforcements to higher authorities, they will take a minimum of three days to arrive.

In other words, this was the perfect opportunity to save innocent civilians in the name of justice, beat the crap out of the bad guys, relieve their restlessness, and gain live combat experience!

The colonels stomped their leather shoes as they argued fiercely beside Gen. Hazama.

Col. Kamo of the 1st Combat Group must have been tired of the endless arguments, because he came before Gen. Hazama saying, "Please! Let us go!"

The 1st Combat Group was a combined-arms unit, built around a company of infantry, supported by artillery, AAA, tank, engineer, signals, sanitations, weapons and logistics platoons.

"Our 101st Reinforced Squadron is at full strength and mission-ready! We're ready to go at any time!"

Behind Col. Kamo, Ltc. Tsuge stood up as well, saying something very troublesome. It was troublesome because he had gathered his men before the order to move out had been given. At this moment they were probably in full battle gear and running laps.

"No, if we take our time jogging along the ground, we'll take too long to get there. Under these conditions, only we can get there in time. Commander, please order the 4th Combat Group into action."

Col. Kengun said this as he strode forward. The 4th Combat Group was a helicopter-centric aerial combat group... in other words, an American-style air cavalry unit.

"We've prepared the amplifiers and speakers, as well as Wagner CDs," said Ltc. Youga of the 401st Squadron.

"Very good, Ltc. Youga," Kengun nodded. It seemed Kengun wanted to bring him along too.

"..."

Hazama pinched his nose between his thumb and forefinger, rolling it slightly.

What should he do with them, these guys... were they possessed by the spirit of Colonel Kilgore? (TL note: see Apocalypse Now <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GKaYOW9zMoY>) Maybe their brains had rotted away...

Even so, he had no choice but to send reinforcements immediately. That being the case, the fast-moving 4th Combat Group would be the best choice.

Hazama gave Kengun his orders.

Col. Kamo and Ltc. Tsuge, among others, stood still as though bearing mute witness to the end of the world. Conversely, Kengun and Youga were all smiles.

“And what are you going to play?”

“The Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra, of course.”

As he watched the two of them leave, Hazama could guess what the two of them would be like in a few hours.

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The squadrons of AH-1 Cobra and UH-1 Blackhawk helicopters flew on a NOE (nap-of-earth) course, while their loudspeakers blasted Wagner's operatic score through the sky.

All around them, the bandits fled.

What came from the sky were wings of death.

Though there was no way there would be anti-aircraft missiles pointed at them, the helicopters launched flares anyway. These flares were weighed down by gravity and traced a trajectory through the air, and the dozens of smoke trails they left resembled the wings of an angel.

When the locals saw it, they must have trembled in fear at the descent of a goddess of war.

The AH-1 Cobras fired their rocket pods, and turned the ground into a sea of fire.

Bullets rained from the sky and mowed the bandits down.

There were no blind spots under their overlapping fields of vision. The troops did not even need to dismount, and they cut down the bandits from their perches on their helicopters.

The residents watching this must have taken this apocalyptic vision to be a glimpse of hell...

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At this moment, the residents of Italica were desperately repairing their walls and barriers.

Once they heard that they would be aided not just by the Apostle of Emroy, the Elf and the mage, but even by the “Men in Green”, the townspeople’s courage multiplied a hundredfold, and the soldiers’ morale soared.

If they did have the power to defeat a Flame Dragon, then routing these broken men who had become bandits would be a trivial task. Of course, the men in green only numbered 12, so they would still have to fight. However, once they took out their “rods of steel”, they would destroy the bandits easily.

The despair that filled the town from earlier had vanished, and the peoples’ eyes were filled with light and hope. Nobody wanted to leave their homes behind and flee, so if they could, they still wanted to protect this town. The presence of Itami and the others was the source of their hope.

The eyes of the townspeople were locked firmly on the backs of Itami and the others.

At Piña’s request, Itami had moved his people to the frontline on the south gate. This way, it would not be hard for them to respond to requests for help.

According to her, the south gate had already been broken through once, and the defensive preparations there were completely destroyed. As such, it was a weakness in their defenses. In the upcoming battle, it should be the site of intense fighting.

The last time, they had halted the enemy advance with berms and fences, but the ensuing melee had left many dead. Now the townspeople were mobilized in full to repair the fences and strengthen the berms.

To Itami, in order to safeguard the defensive line of the city wall and gate, it would be best to concentrate their fighting strength there, but Piña insisted that they would have a second line of defense behind the walls of fences in the interior.

Her tactics seemed to assume that the main gate would be broken down.

Unlike Itami, who was waiting for reinforcements, Piña did not think they could hold out long enough for help to arrive, so her plan was to make the invaders pay in blood for every inch they advanced, in the hopes of breaking their morale. In truth, the idea was not a bad one, so Itami held his tongue.

Itami gathered his men atop the city gate, and from there they had a good view of the beautiful stone streets of a medieval-age city, under the light of the setting sun.

Although it was a regional town, Italica had a population of over 5000 people. It was located at the crossroads of the Appian Way and the Tisarian Way, and there were shops and inns located along the streets that ran in the four cardinal directions. Behind them were various warehouses, stables and merchant offices.

In the forest to the north was the large manor of Count Formal, which was surrounded by other luxurious homes, turning it into a high-class residential district.

The south, east and west portions were surrounded by stone walls, while the north was surrounded by cliffs as a natural barrier.

Itami turned back, and looked along the outskirts of the city.

There were roads that stretched to the horizon. There were planting fields and fallow fields where the cattle grazed. There were fallen trees, forests, and a few small houses. And then...

Itami's binoculars caught sight of the bandit scouts, who were several men on horses. They moved slowly, probably trying to spy out the state of the defense preparations.

Beyond them, he could see the bandits' hideout.

"So, we're going to take their attack head-on, huh."

Itami nodded to Sgt. Maj. Kuwabara. That was definitely a possibility.

The bandits did not have the option of an enveloping attack.

There were far too few bandits to encircle the town, and a siege would take a very long time. That would be very bad for the bandits. Similarly, tunnelling and a slow, cautious advance by digging trenches were out of the question.

That being the case, the bandits could only pick a point and assault it. However, that was not simply an application of brute force, but an attack that would make use of the unique advantage of the attacker.

This advantage was the attackers' ability to dictate the time and place of their engagements. With this freedom, they could feint an attack and then break through the weakened defenses elsewhere. That was the typical approach.

The objective they would attack would still be weak, despite it being a feint.

"I see, so the reason they gave us the south gate was..."

They planned to deliberately make a weakness along the defensive line, which would draw in the enemy's attacks.

That being the case, Piña's tactics were understandable.

During the last battle, they had also deliberately feigned a vulnerability, so the enemy would think it was an easy target. When the enemy committed themselves to the attack, they began a battle of attrition with them from the strong second defense line. Practically speaking, even if the enemy broke through the city gate, they would be stopped and worn down against the sturdy inner defensive line.

Since the attackers' and defenders' forces were too small for a pitched battle all over the city, they favored concentrating their forces like that.

Giving the weaker south gate to Itami and the others was a tacit admission that they were going to be bait, in order to turn the south gate into the site of a pitched battle. Thinking of that, it made more sense that she would focus on reinforcing the inner defensive line.

"Well, you say that, but will the enemy fall for it twice?"

The enemy should have considered this after being beaten once. Would they really try to attack this weakly-defended location?

In addition, this tactic had another big problem associated with it.

“Furuta! Put the machine gun over here. Azuma, rifle goes there.”

Kuwabara assigned each soldier their designated Area of Responsibility.

The troopers braced themselves and their Type 64 rifles against the crenellated walls.

They would be firing down from a height of three stories. If the enemy drew close enough, they could start firing arrows at them, so they designated the range of the bows as the FPL (final protective line), and apart from that they could pick their own targets at their own pace.

There was only an hour left until the sun completely set. Kuribayashi distributed the night vision gear while Kurokawa was left to mind the vehicles and equipment.

Behind Itami and the others were a large number of citizens carrying farming tools or wooden clubs, waiting uneasily for directions. Just then, Nishina came, holding a phrasebook in one hand with both arms out, making digging motions, and indicating that they should fill the sacks they had with earth and bring them over.

The others were collecting burnable wood, in preparation for a bonfire. The townspeople wondered why they weren't making a fire at night as they worked.

Meanwhile, someone asked a question of Itami, who was looking through his helmet-mounted night vision gear with Tuka and Lelei.

“Eh? Why are we helping the Imperials who should be our enemy? Well, it’s to protect the people of this town.”

Rory laughed as she heard the answer.

“Do you really mean that?”

“Yes, I do.”

Itami’s attempt at humor made Rory shrug in a “stop kidding me” way.

To Itami, the Empire was his enemy.

If they went by the reasoning of “The enemy of the enemy is my friend”, it would not be strange to take the bandits as allies, but Itami did not do that.

Piña was an Imperial Princess defending Count Formal’s family. Because of that, she had negotiated with Itami and asked for his help.

Rory was there too, but since she couldn’t stand Piña’s presence, she left shortly after.

And then, Itami agreed to “the protection of the people of Italica”. Officially, they could fight together because they had the same objective of defending Italica.

Even so, she still could not understand why Itami was taking orders from an enemy princess. After all, he should have expected that the south gate would become a forlorn hope and the site of a fierce battle.

“Do you want to know why?”

Itami was clumsy, and could not properly attach his night vision gear to his helmet. For convenience’s sake, he let Rory hold his helmet with both hands.

Due to the difference in body height, it made Rory look like she was holding up her hands in prayer, while Itami was lowering his head to listen to her.

“Emroy is a war god, so He does not forbid killing. However, the motive for killing is important. Lies stain the soul.”

Itami wanted to take his helmet from Rory and finish working on it, but Rory did not hand it to Itami, but made to place it on his head instead.

Itami raised his head to let Rory put his helmet on.

As for her question, he quirked the edges of his mouth up. It looked like a smile.

“I wasn’t lying when I said I wanted to protect the townspeople.”

“Really?”

“Of course. Although, there was another reason...”

Rory looked at Itami like she was going to bore through him with her eyes.

“I want that Princess to understand that it’s better to get along with us than to fight us.”

Rory smiled malevolently, as she believed she understood Itami’s words.

“Interesting. Very interesting.”

He would carve the word “fear” into the Princess’ heart. He would show his fighting power to her without holding back, and make her tremble at the thought of doing battle with him. That way, getting along with him would be much more attractive than fighting him.

“Well, if that’s the case, I’d like to help too. It’s been a while since I last had the chance to cut loose.”

Rory lifted her skirt and curtsied to Itami, like a dancer bowing to her partner.

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The battle began when the night was almost over.

The attack was executed just before the sun rose.

In the darkness before dawn, the bandit archers launched flame arrows at the eastern gate.

At the eastern gate was the knight Norma Co Igloo.

Under Norma's direction, the sentries and militia returned fire with their bows. Though they were called militia, they were farmers who had never touched a bow in their lives and expecting accuracy from them was impossible. However, their arrow fire would suppress the enemy and might even cause a casualty or two.

In this way, the battle became an exchange of arrows for a time.

The soldiers, the farmers, the broken men who had become bandits, they all screamed and fell.

Between the archers marched footmen in armor and carrying sturdy shields. They pressed close to the wall. Their uniforms were varied while their shields were of different sizes and shapes, which suggested that they were of mixed origins.

Against them the stout grocery shop aunties and the older children hurled rocks, or poured cauldrons of molten lead down on them. These weapons were more effective and destructive than the inaccurate bow volleys.

Below the walls, the bandits raised their shields in an attempt to protect themselves from the storm of arrows and rocks raining down on them.

Even if they were shot by arrows, knocked out by rocks, or burned alive by boiling oil, they did not retreat.

They must have wanted to expend the hatred and frustration they felt at not being able to attack Arnus against this place, and they rammed the eastern gate with huge logs.

As for the bandits... for the remnants of the defeated coalition army, the Battle of Arnus was not a battle.

Without having even glimpsed their enemy, without knowing what was going on, their own people had simply fallen over. The hatred for the Empire which had cruelly kept them in ignorance of their foe, their grudges against the useless commanders who could only urge them forward to their deaths, these feelings were deeply carved into their hearts.

Without commanders, without comrades, without allegiance, without supplies, without food, they wandered around in the wilderness, and in the end, they had become bandits, without even their homes. Soon, others who had suffered as they did came, and their numbers had grown until now.

Their respect for the Empire had become an equal amount of hatred and anger, which ruled their souls.

This was war, which sliced with swords, killed with arrows, burned with fire and trampled with hooves.

This was war, with its rape, its plunder, its massacres, and its deaths.

Indeed, they had made war their motivation. A personal war, a war that could satisfy them. A simple slaughter, a simple spreading of death. The feelings of stabbing, slashing and being stabbed, bathing in one's opponents' blood, hugging the cold earth as they died. They threw themselves forward to experience this. If not, the war would be over for them.

Several ladders caught on the city wall.

The bandits raised their shields and climbed them.

Avoiding the arrows that flew at them, the bandits finally reached the top of the wall.

A brave farmer hacked up a ladder even after taking an arrow in the shoulder. The bandits praised his courage as they fired their arrows, cheering for him even as they cut him down.

The ladder that had lost its grip on the wall fell with the soldiers to the ground, along with the farmer that had brought it down.

Even the loud crash as it hit the ground brought a round of cheering.

It was as though they had gone mad at a festival, banging on the shields with their swords and screaming in their own tongues.

This was the song of praise they sang to Emroy, god of war.

The madness of battle was their sacrifice to Emroy and the flames of war, fuelled by the souls of the dead combatants, burned fiercely.

The flame arrows struck the clock tower, which burned wildly out of control against the black of the night.

The Apostle, Rory Mercury, was trying to endure it.

She hugged herself to endure it.

Sweat gushed down her forehead.

“Wh-why?”

The spirit of battle that floated around her infected her flesh and penetrated her spirit.

“Why aren’t they attacking here?”

The flames of war scorched her soul, and sweet movements flowed from her heart and up her swaying spine.

Her arms and legs moved on their own, and she shook like a priestess who was intoxicated by hallucinogenic drugs.

“Huuu.... haaaa...”

The pleasure flowing out from inside her nearly brought her to climax, and against the black of night, the demigoddess twisted her body so everyone could see her bewitching form.

“Is she alright?”

Itami wanted to go over to Rory, since he was surprised by her sudden frenzy, but Lelei and Tuka stopped him.

“It’s because she’s an Apostle...”

He did not quite understand, but that seemed to be why Rory was so frustrated.

If she was like this while she was so far away from the battlefield, what would she be like in the center of it?

She would probably see everyone as an enemy and slaughter them all. Nobody would be able to stop her, not even herself.

Lelei’s explanation just made Itami nervous.

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“Bandits should go attack villages! You’re pretty damn bold to attack a town!”

This was Norma the knight’s cry. He had discovered that none of the arrows on his side had hit. Even if all the people on his side were amateurs, he could see that the path of the launched arrows had mysteriously diverted from their targets, as though they were protected by the wind.

“Could it be that the enemy can summon spirits?”

Norma drew his sword and cut down a southern bandit who was scaling the wall. The stricken soldier fell off the wall and to the ground.

However, a bearded bandit from the north tried to hack Norma down from behind.

After intercepting it with his sword, the bandits behind continued attacking the militia on defense. They had spears, clubs, morning stars, twin swords, scimitars and more.

The endless flow of bandits overwhelmed the people of Italica, and they had nowhere to run.

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There were some differences in the current situation from Piña's battle plan.

They had expected the first line of defense to fall, but it had fallen too soon. Now the tops of the city wall were a battleground and the sentries and militia had been forced off.

"We're too weak. That's even when you consider the raised morale."

They'd had expected the enemy to be aware of their schemes and to be on guard for it.

However, in truth the enemy was not on guard at all.

They attacked and attacked, without any tactics or strategy,

And the militia and sentries who took this attack were caught wrong-footed right from the beginning. Thus, they could not pin down the enemy like Piña had hoped. They could not even inflict significant losses.

Still, on the whole, the defenders could still fight.

“Reality is different from what you picture in your head.” Piña, who knew this, was not surprised that her plan had not turned out exactly as she had hoped.

Even if she felt a vague sense of foreboding, like something stuck between her teeth, Piña followed the plan and moved her main fighting strength from the east gate to the defensive barriers they had built in the interior.

The east and northwest gates were reinforced with a second defensive line of berms and fences.

Although a second defensive line sounded good on paper, they had been built with the assumption that the first line would be overrun. So the first line was essentially a sacrifice.

The militia did not understand this when the battle started. However, now they understood that the people manning the gates had been abandoned from the start.

Their allies stood at the berms and other barriers they built behind them, yet none of them stepped forward to help. They were merely watching

them fight and die. How many people would not despair after realizing this?

Some people realized this and gave up, swinging their swords wildly until they soon fell.

“Where are the men in green? Where are our reinforcements?!”

They could not possibly come. After all, they had been stationed at the south gate, as fellow sacrifices.

And so, as the townspeople watched, the gate’s last defender finally fell.

Piña had assumed that the bandits would immediately press the attack once they took the east gate, but the bandits did not do so. They raised their swords and spears, and cheered three times. This was a literal sacrifice, after all. After that, the city gates opened slowly, and the cavalry and soldiers from outside entered.

The horsemen dragged the corpses of the militia and sentries who had fallen from the city wall. They began tossing those bodies into the city.

Among them were the bodies of the rock-throwing children and the aunties.

They hurled the severed heads of farmers and merchants at the inner fence.

As the townspeople waited for the enemy to attack, the corpses of their friends, relatives and family piled up like a small mountain.

The townspeople facing the bandits from behind the fences gritted their teeth against their tears and despair, while the bandits mocked them.

They cursed and insulted them as cowards hiding in a cage.

They toyed with the corpses as though they were puppets.

How could the militia, made of farmers and merchants with weapons, bear to watch this?

“Bastards!”

A hot-blooded young man leapt over the fence, shovel in hand, while others also joined him.

In this way, the battle inside the city was completely different from how Piña had envisioned it, and her battle plan fell apart.

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Rory’s lewd moaning and physical contortions grew more intense as time passed.

She held her breath and shook her hair. Her body bent backward like a bow. She grabbed her head, on the verge of tears, and her feet stamped the ground.

Her feverish gasping and twisted expression looked like she had been cursed, like she was a puppet shuddering on her strings, her body twitching and her arms flailing.

It was a cursed, mad dance she could not control by her own will, but it was beautiful.

According to Lelei's explanations, the souls of the fallen were passing through her body on their way to Emroy. Although she would be influenced by the personalities of the soul and their fighting spirit, to a demigoddess like her, they were like an aphrodisiac.

Just giving in to this frenzy would be easy, but she couldn't just give in, or rather, she was not allowed to give in. The heat and anxiety burning through her chest was making her suffer.

"No, no, noooo! I'll go crazy if this goes on!!"

Tozu, watching from behind, whispered, "Dammit. I'm hard."

"Shut up, man, so am I."

Although neither of them were into children, Rory's moaning must have made them think of something pleasant. The voice from Rory's shuddering body was just that seductive.

As expected, Kuribayashi whispered, "This is bad, right?" Tuka covered her blushing face, while Lelei's was a picture of calm indifference.

Itami's sigh was his answer.

It would seem both sides had forgotten this place. There was no sign of the enemy, nor were there any messages from their allies. Thus, they had no way of knowing what was happening at the east gate.

The reinforcements from Arnus should be here, and they needed a forward observer to guide their attacks, so he decided to send someone over.

“Kuribayashi!”

She replied with a “Yes”, and stepped forward.

“Sorry about this, but could you accompany Rory? Having men around might cause problems. After that, we, including Tomita for a total of four people, will head to the east gate. Sgt. Maj. Kuwabara, I’ll leave the rest to you. Rory, we’re going! Just hang on a bit more!”

But Rory could not bear it any further.

She jumped down from the three-storey high city wall, and darted toward the east like a rabbit.

Itami and the others followed her.

They ran to the base of the wall and got onto the nearby Type 73 truck. Tomita revved the engine, and amidst the squealing of tires, they raced over to the east as well.

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The three helicopters, one AH-1 Cobra leading and two UH-1s behind it, raced through the brightening sky.

“Col. Kengun! 5 minutes to the objective!”

Ltc. Youga said, “According to the report from 3RCN (3rd Recon Team), the east gate is currently engaged. For safety’s sake, we should approach from the east and wipe out the enemies at the gate.”

Kengun nodded in approval, and said, “Take care of it, Ltc.”

The men in the helicopter cabin loaded the magazines for their rifles.

“Two minutes!”

As Youga said that, he pressed the button on the amplifier.

He turned the volume to its maximum, and then pressed the “play” button.

The sound of horns rang out.

The light sounds of woodwinds raced through the air like a Pegasus, and the main theme commenced with the blaring of the trumpets.

This was a song written in honor of the eight Valkyries.

One of the troopers who had finished loading his rifle placed his helmet between his legs. His curious comrade asked him:

“Why does everyone sit on their helmets?”

"So we don't get our balls blown off!"

\*\*\*

Blades carved into flesh and blood sprayed out.

A human head came apart like a watermelon being split at the seaside. The sound of the sword hit echoed around.

There were shouts of men facing their dooms and bitter cries of suffering.

Like a train station at rush hour, people were pressed against each other everywhere.

Nobody could spare a thought for the overall situation. All their attention was focused on the enemy in front of them while they hacked and slashed with their swords. Of course, some people were cowering on the ground, trying to crawl to a place without enemies, but they were trampled into the ground by horses.

The ground was strewn with corpses and bodies and remains, and the stone floor was dyed a reddish black by dried blood, and the brighter red of freshly-spilled blood flowed from friend and foe alike.

That was why they did not hear the distant sound that thundered through the air.

A woman's singing rang through the sky, accompanied by trombones.

At this moment, time stood still.

It stood still when she leapt over the berms, the fences, and landed on the ground.

She knocked over men and horses, friend and foes, and cleared a space around her.

In that instant, everything stopped.

Under the force of that impact and its destructive power, all sound vanished and the clamor of battle faded away. In its place, they heard the sound of trumpets:

「Ho-jo to-ho! Ho-jo to-ho! Ho-jo to-ho!」

Everyone's eyes were fixed on the black object that had appeared before them.

「Ho-jo to-ho! Ho-jo to-ho! Ho-jo to-ho!」

It was a girl in jet-black priest's clothing, edged with lace.

「Ho-jo to-ho! Ho-jo to-ho! Ho-jo to-ho!」

Both her knees rested on the ground.

Her left hand was planted on the floor.

In the other was a halberd that sent chills up people's spines.

She raised her head and her mad eyes looked forward. A radiant silver glow limned her hair.

**In that moment, as the demigoddess smiled mockingly while the horns blew, the top of the east gate caught fire.**

## **Chapter 12**

The formation of three choppers raked the bandits outside with gunfire.

As the helicopters flew by, they dropped off grenades, like they were giving gifts. It showed the thoroughness of the JSDF.

The attack came from several sides, in several waves.

From the east to the west, then doubling back and going over the ground the covered... again and again, from left to right, front to back, an endless hail of gunfire sprayed across the land and killed everything that moved.

The bandits scattered, like a swarm of fleeing spiders. However, whether on foot or mounted, none of them could escape.

The bandits, caught in the middle of their burning, killing and pillaging, had the tables turned on them, and they fell to the ground after being hit by bullets.

A brave man actually managed to nock and loose an arrow at them, but the arrow fired into the sky had little force. It fell swiftly, without any power.

Aboard the helicopters, a trooper placed the blade of his rifle's front sight into the middle of the rear sight's aperture, and centered the bandit's head in his sight picture. He factored in the speed of the helicopter and the movement of the bandit as he took aim.

"Proper aim, proper posture, proper cheek weld, don't snatch the trigger..." As he muttered this to himself, he adjusted the 2.7kg weight of the rifle in his arms.

He fired three times.

His right shoulder absorbed the recoil, and the lack of a need to recover the cartridges was oddly relaxing.

Usually, they would be under strict orders to keep an eye on where all their rounds (or parts thereof) went, but now the empty casings fell to the floor of the helicopter, and eventually out onto the bodies of the bandits.

The muzzle of the rifle did not shine, veiled as it was in heavy black smoke.

The warriors' bodies became sacrifices for the flames of war, which blazed brightly.

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Italica's city gate was wreathed in crimson flame, and the sun that rose into the sky filled the world with heat and radiance.

The fully-armored soldiers were ripped to shreds.

The sound of Death's wings were different from those of birds. It was a more ferocious, more foreboding sound than theirs, which repeated on and on.

A hail of lead fell upon the stones of the city wall, leaving it pock-marked with small holes.

The mounted Piña, who was pressing her throat as she shouted orders, suddenly lost her voice and stared mutely at the tragedy unfolding before her.

She watched the iron Pegasi with their whirling wings of steel, soaring through the sky that they owned.

The first thing one would think of when one mentioned airborne troops were obviously the Dragon riders. But what Piña saw was not a living creature, but a far more terrible thing. Dragon riders should have attacked far more elegantly, using sword and lance in equal measure. However, these were different. They brought with them a storm of one-sided slaughter, of utter brutality.

When the flames of the iron Pegasi struck the ground, they destroyed everything they hit. Stones were reduced to pebbles, horses were blasted to pieces and men caught in the blasts lay down and died.

「Ho-jo to-ho! Ho-jo to-ho! Hei-a ha! Hei-a ha!」

It was a symphony of death. She had heard all sorts of music during her courtly life, but Piña had never before heard such a beautiful yet stately display. Horns, trumpets, bassoons and the voice of the singer thundered across the battlefield with incredible volume, playing an accompaniment to a massacre.

「Ho-jo to-ho! Ho-jo to-ho! Hei-a ha! Hei-a ha!」

Piña shuddered, as though she had been stabbed in the back by a sword of ice. In an instant, everything had been destroyed by an absolute brutality that nothing could resist. Her emotions, positive and negative, blended within her and shook both her body and soul.

「Ho-jo to-ho! Ho-jo to-ho! Hei-a ha! Hei-a ha!」

Piña's mind and soul were battered by the carnage on all sides assaulting her every sense.

She eventually came to the conclusion that humanity was worthless, meaningless, and powerless.

「Hei-a ha!―――Hei-a ha!―――」

Until now, all the foes she had met had been physically massive beings.

However, this was a mistake.

She could not look them in the eye, yet she could not tear her eyes away.

「Ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!!

Ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!!」

Piña was defeated by the lyrics known as the “Valkyries’ Mockery”. Her pride, her status, everything about her which had worth was denied in an instant.

She did not know what the words meant, but she understood their meaning.

*Oh miniscule humanity!*

*Oh tragic and powerless humanity!*

*What of your power and authority? All those things you pass down through the generations, we shall destroy in the blink of an eye, like so!*

Piña wept as she felt the Valkyries’ disdain. At the same time, she knew there were mighty beings which far exceeded herself.

Powerful beings.

Radiant beings.

What welled up in her heart was respect. Respect and fear.

And there was despair, that such awesome entities were so far removed from her.

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“Crap! Rory, she — she’s charged into the middle of the enemy!”

As an otaku, Itami was in awe of Rory’s strength.

However, this magnificent little girl did not seem very strong at all.

As a result, he was worried. He had spent time with her, and he was concerned for her. He could not simply leave her alone like this.

Itami jumped off the truck and ordered, “Fix bayonets” while he applied his own bayonet.

Kuribayashi and Tomita fixed their bayonets as well, tapping them to make sure they were secure.

They looked at each other. Their firing selectors were switched from “SAFE” to “AUTO”. He told them, “Don’t split up”, and then they advanced.

However, surging ahead of the rest like a cannonball was Kuribayashi.

Itami and Tomita muttered, “Cheh, that stupid woman” and then sprinted as well, determined not to be left behind.

“Forward, charge!”

They locked onto their targets, advanced a few steps, and fired.

Another few steps, and then they were shooting from the hip.

They repeated the maneuvers they had learned in training.

Several bandits fell amidst sprays of blood.

Ahead of them was Rory, wielding her halberd in a dance of death. She swung, spun, cleaved her foe's shield apart and then knocked him down. She did not seem worried at all, and her movements were relaxed. However, the bodies were piling up around her.

Her foes tried to press her with their shields, thrusting over the tops with their swords and attacking her knees under the bottoms. But Rory simply took a step back and swung her halberd from top to bottom.

She cut them apart, man and shield in one blow, like she was splitting firewood.

She did not even look behind at the enemies circling behind her — she simply thrust behind with the pointed base of her halberd.

Against a spear attack from all directions, she jumped up as the shafts crossed beneath her, and used them as footholds to vault into the air.

Rory's skirt blossomed like a black rose, showing off her black lace garterbelts that connected to her black panties, and the smooth, flowing lines of her legs. She swung her halberd in a full circle.

As if caught in the blades of a food processor, the tops of the bandits' heads came off, spurting blood like a crimson tide.

Her face was spattered in crimson pearls from the bloody rain, as she cleaved the wind, cleaved through flesh, cleaved through steel.

A greatsword filled with equal amounts of fear, hatred and bloodlust swung down on Rory's head.

But Rory's keen eyes noticed the attack, and her opponent's desperate gamble failed.

With her left hand, Rory grabbed her skirt and ducked the blow like a bullfighter evading a bull's charge.

At this moment, Kuribayashi arrived.

Shouting, "Bayonet thrust!" she stabbed the man trying to ambush Rory in the back.

She used the recoil of firing her weapon to help extract her bayonet, then slashed down at the foe in front of her. She stabbed and stabbed, then swung her buttstock like a club. Smash, smash, smash! Then she pointed the barrel of her rifle at the tip of the man's nose, and fired.

She parried a sword swing with her rifle, which ruined the rifle. The buttstock was dented too, but Kuribayashi didn't care, simply sweeping her opponent's feet and then stomping his face in with the heel of her boot.

The wobbly bipod fell off with a clattering sound, and Kuribayashi went "Acha~" as she thought of what the armoury sergeant would say. Then again, this was why the Type 64 had been issued, and not the Type 89.

Muttering, “Expendable item, expendable item”, Kuribayashi gripped her rifle tightly.

This was barbaric, hand to hand combat from an earlier age. But Kuribayashi had trained for it.

Her small frame was as nimble as a cat’s, and she overwhelmed her opponents in close combat and gunned them down as they tried to retreat. After her rounds were expended, she threw a grenade at her enemies’ heads.

She judged that her enemies’ bodies could serve as a shield for herself. The explosions behind the enemy filled them with fear. They lost the will to fight and cowered behind their raised shields.

Kuribayashi drew her sidearm and fired three shots. Since they were using wooden shields, the 9mm bullets could splinter a shield in one shot, shatter it in another, and strike the person holding them with a third.

Rory charged into the breach and Kuribayashi reloaded her rifle in the meantime.

Itami and Tomita did not want to fall behind, so they protected the girls. With their rifles, pistols and bayonets, they kept the enemies from flanking Rory and Kuribayashi.

If one could take a step back and calmly observe the ladies doing battle, it would be a beautiful sight. Especially Rory, whose might was indomitable. Was it because of her battle frenzy, or was that just the way she was? The two of them were smiling widely like they were in the

throes of pleasure, even though this was the battlefield. Still, any man would want to see a face like that in bed with him.

The two of them eagerly displayed their tandem combat technique.

Bayonet swings, halberd thrusts, rifle shots, grenades, the whirling hilt of the halberd, flying kicks and straight punches defeated the enemy.

There wasn't even any time to change magazines. Once Kuribayashi was out, she shouted, "El-tee, gun!"

Itami tossed his rifle to Kuribayashi, and Kuribayashi tossed her almost-wrecked rifle to Itami.

The Italica citizens and guards in the middle of the fights found that the enemy attack had suddenly weakened. After looking around, they saw Itami and company.

"The Apostle of Emroy is here! The Men in Green are here!" As they shouted these things, they regained their discipline, and began helping each other to fight. After that, they heard the sound of explosions and the blaring of the trumpets.

「Führet die Mähren fern von einander, bis unsrer Helden Hass sich gelegt!

Der Helden Grimm büsste schon die Graue!

Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!

Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!

Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!J

And then, the attack helicopter appeared, breaking through the clouds of smoke that obscured the sky.

Their sheer majesty awed the people watching. They raised their heads to gaze upon the iron Pegasus that had descended from the sky.

The AH-1 Cobra's 20mm M197 tri-barrelled gatling autocannon swiveled to aim at the bandits which Rory and the others had pressed into a mass.

Seeing this, Itami and Tomita nodded to each other.

Itami grabbed Rory while Tomita grabbed Kuribayashi from behind and ran, shouting "Get down!" as they did.

As though they had been waiting for Itami's retreat, the 20mm rounds, fired at a rate of 680 to 750 rounds per minute, chewed the enemy into mincemeat.

The Cobra descended as it fired. This was the final blow.

The flames of war blazed, and the torrent of shells destroyed everything.

Before long, the gatling gun stopped. The sound of the trumpets had faded away, and in everyone's ears was the sound of the helicopters' propellor blades. All that remained were wisps of gunsmoke.

The UH-1J hovered in mid-air.

Ropes dangled down, and JSDF troopers descended them. With swift movements and organized effort, they searched for any survivors among the enemy.

At first, nobody dared to speak to the “Men in Green”. Whether in numbers or strength, it was clear that they were soldiers from somewhere. Someone reverently asked Tomita where they were from, and the answer they received was “We’re from the JSDF”.

Under the powerful downwash of the helicopter’s propellers, Rory noticed that her hair was not being tossed around. As she pressed down her skirt which was being blown up by the prop wash, she looked around. However, there were no more enemies around her.

Suddenly she realized it.

She realized she was being hugged by someone.

Someone’s left arm protruded from below her left armpit across her chest, and a gloved palm rested on her right breast. Rory Mercury noticed this, and then her cherry blossom-pink lips parted, revealing sharp canines.

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Piña stood in front of Itami, Rory, Tuka and Lelei, but she had no idea what to say.

Just yesterday, when she had met the four of them, she had ordered them to help her, as though she was in charge.

She had been leaning on a table, elegantly sipping her tea, explaining important matters to them like they were her subordinates. This was how Piña and people like her lived in high society.

Well, maybe yesterday's attitude was not so bad, but it was close enough.

But what about her status today? Was she not one of the tragically defeated?

Indeed, the bandits had been beaten back, and the townspeople were happy to have won and survived.

Of course, mourning and getting over the loss of life and lost family members would take a while. Rebuilding the ruined villages and town would be a problem too. However, this victory had been won by betting their lives, so it should be celebrated. Mourning alone would not mean anything to the deceased.

In that sense, Piña should have celebrated, as one of the victors. However, the desolate atmosphere around her was one of defeat.

She did not feel like she had won at all.

The winners were Rory, Itami and the "JSDF".

These enemies who had taken control of Arnus, who rode iron Pegasi, who held magic in their hands which could scorch the earth into a

roaring inferno, who had exterminated in an instant those bandits that had troubled Piña.

If they decided to turn their fangs on Piña and Italica, what could she do? The Empire's Princess Piña and the young Countess Myui of House Formal would become prisoners, and the Empire's breadbasket would be taken by the enemy.

What about the townspeople? Could they resist?

No, they would welcome the invaders with open arms. After all, it was the JSDF who had won the day. Talk of the "Men in Green" had already spread from the mouths of Coda's villagers.

The common folk were simple and did not understand governance. They would be hooked by anything that benefited them, even if it was only temporary.

*If they demanded this town in exchange... I might have to kneel in front of them and beg for their mercy, and for them to release myself and Countess Myui.*

*Me, begging an enemy for mercy? A proud Imperial Princess? Pulling on a man's sleeve like some common whore in an alehouse?*

Piña gritted her teeth.

If she went down on her knees and kissed their toes, they might actually do it. She would have to accede to any humiliating requests they had.

Piña fearfully awaited the demands of Itami and his people.

She had planned to wait. However, in the next few moments, her vision regained its color and the sound from around her called her back to her senses.

“We wish to take our pick of the prisoners.”

Lelei translated Hamilton’s words to Col. Kengun. From a linguistics standpoint, Itami alone could not translate successfully, so Lelei had to help.

Kengun nodded from a rigid posture.

“We understand that labor is the key to Italica’s recovery. Although that is your practice, I hope that you can treat them humanely. We only need three to five captives for questioning. We hope you can accommodate us on that point.”

“They don’t quite understand the term ‘humanely’...”

Lelei was working hard. The fact that sweat was dripping from her forehead onto her expressionless face only underscored that.

She tried to explain in her own words, and said, “Like you would treat a friend, relative or acquaintance.” However, Hamilton frowned at that.

“Would our friends and relatives attack peaceful towns and villages, to murder and plunder?”

Piña called out to keep Hamilton, who was shouting angrily, under control.

“All right, then don’t treat them too cruelly. You played a big part in this victory, so we can let you have that.”

Hamilton relaxed after Piña opened her mouth.

Lelei spoke to Kengun for a while, and then she translated something for her.

“We can understand that.”

Although she had butted in, where was this and what was she doing?

Piña desperately tried to mobilize her brainpower to understand the situation.

And who was this man, anyway?

The man standing in front of Piña was a stout-bodied warrior. He wore green as well, but his bearing was clearly different from a mere footsoldier.

His belly was fat, but from the wrinkles in his forehead, he was a grizzled veteran. The man’s forthright, open attitude suggested he was confident in himself. That self-confidence must have been born of long experience, and Piña would kill to have that experience and self-assurance.

He seemed to be a JSDF commander.

After realizing this, Piña sat down in Count Formal's seat, since she was representing him. Beside her, Countess Myui sat between her butler and the head maid.

The speaker was Hamilton, but the one who would negotiate, make proposals and make the final decision was Piña herself.

Piña carefully considered her words to make sure of the circumstances. But in a situation like this, what kind of agreement could they come to?

She beckoned Hamilton with a finger, and Hamilton, with bandages on her forehead and the rest of her, came close.

"Ah, Your Highness, you've come to, I was worried."

"Forgive me, I made you worry."

After that, they decided to go through the details again to make sure.

"Hm. Then, I would like to clarify the conditions with you."

Hamilton recited them like she was reading out an epic poem.

*"First, the JSDF shall pick three to five captives from here and take them back. These captives and all rights pertaining to them shall belong to the JSDF. In addition, House Formal promises not to mistreat the captives."*

*Second, as thanks for the relief efforts of the JSDF, House Formal and Imperial Princess Piña Co Lada will house and guarantee the safety of*

*envoys from Japan. In addition, the number of envoys, living expenses and so on will be agreed upon later, but House Formal and the Princess will pay the 100 suwanis to the JSDF with no strings attached.*

*Third, the JSDF and the refugees staying at Arnus will not be made to pay tolls, income tax, currency exchange surcharges and various other taxes when trading in the domain of House Formal.*

*Fourth, once the treaty goes into effect, the JSDF as led by Col. Kengun may not touch the wealth, holdings or personnel of House Formal (with the exception of any captives from the first point) and the citizens and must leave the domain of House Formal immediately. However, small groups and the refugees living at Arnus will be guaranteed free passage in the domain of House Formal for the purposes of communicating with House Formal.*

*Fifth, the duration of this treaty is one year. If both parties do not object, it will automatically renew itself.*

*Signed by*

*Countess Myui Formal*

*Imperial Princess Piña Co Lada*

*3rd day of Mist Month, 687 IR"*

After reading the contents of the parchment, Hamilton handed it to Piña.

She read it a few times. They had not come off badly. Or rather, these were actually pretty good terms. And the JSDF had not asked to exercise their rights as the victors.

Taking care of envoys would be troublesome and paying out 100 suwanis would be a sorely felt loss. However, both were necessary expenses. Indeed, they had gotten off lightly by only paying that much.

Hamilton had worked hard too.

Piña had confidence in her ability to read people, but Hamilton Uno Ro's negotiating skills were beyond her expectations. How had she managed to make warriors with such incredible fighting power give up their victors' rights? Magic? Or had she used her feminine wiles during the negotiations?

No matter what, if the diplomats heard about this, they would try and headhunt her. Hamilton's negotiation skills would be critical for the knight band.

Piña thought about these things, then signed the end of the parchment, and then put a blob of wax on it before stamping it with her signet ring.

Beside her, Countess Myui signed and stamped it with great formality.

Hamilton rolled out the parchment before Kengun.

After Lelei and Tuka read and confirmed the terms to him, he signed it in Kanji.

Rory turned away with an unhappy expression on her face, while Itami stood dumbly, with a black right eye.

Two copies of the treaty were made.

While they made the second copy, Piña held on to the first.

She wanted to look at Kengun's signature. The words seemed very stylish to her.

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The terms of the treaty took effect immediately, and so the 401st Squadron flew back to base.

The townspeople took some time out from the post-battle cleanup to watch them soar into the sky, waving their hats at them until they vanished from sight.

Lelei, Tuka and Rory went to the home of the trader Ryudo to discuss business.

Being exempted from taxes was a huge selling point for any trader, so the girls were welcome by all of them. Things were made even simpler since Master Kato had introduced them previously.

They completed the sale of 200 dragon scales for 4000 silver denarii and 200 gold sinks.

However, actually claiming those 4000 denarii in liquid currency was impossible. Ryudo had tried his best, but House Formal's territory had just been ravaged by bandits and trade in Italica had ground to a halt. In addition, the Empire did not supply its outlying regions with a lot of currency, so obtaining even 1000 denarii would be a big challenge.

In the end, the remaining 2000 was paid in credit guarantees, while the remaining 1000 was written off as a discount. In exchange, however, Lelei asked Ryudo for information.

This information pertained to the markets in the region and beyond, and she requested him to carefully investigate the prices of certain items in various markets.

Ryudo laughed as he heard this request.

Unlike the buying and selling of regular citizens, the information on the prices of merchants was an important weapon in price negotiations. No trader would ask so bluntly about them, nor would anyone answer so readily.

However, since Lelei was an outsider, she knew nothing about what things cost. Because she knew nothing, she wanted this information, but broader in scope, with more details, in exchange for the debt owed.

"One thousand silvers, huh."

Nobody had ever paid so much for information before, but since a price had been named, it was a sale. And the goods were of a pretty high quality too.

And so, Ryudo agreed to collect the relevant information from all around.”.

## **Afterwords**

To those readers who have just obtained this volume, or to those who have started reading it, thank you very much.

This story is about how an otaku becomes involved with a world where the modern military meets a fantasy world.

Although I don’t think anyone will want to join the JSDF after reading this book, if you decide to enlist, and they ask you why you want to join, please don’t mention this book. There’s a 90% chance they’ll reject you. However, don’t be too idealistic either, like saying you want to protect democracy, the nation and so on. In short, don’t say anything you yourself would not believe in. The interviewers know all about that, and I can confidently say that because I’ve enlisted six times. These interviews are where you show off your attitude and your will.

If you say you’re choosing this path for yourself, the interviewers can accept it. At a stretch, even if you say, “I just want to eat”, as long as you can convince them of your determination, you might still make it.

The protagonist of this story, Itami Youji, is a man who lives for his hobbies.

During Itami’s interview, he probably replied like that when asked for his motivation.

“I want to join to protect my everyday life (when I can read manga and etc...)”

The interviewer was convinced of Itami's conviction from the way he replied. No, he definitely felt it. Of course, if he had heard the parts in parentheses, it might have gone differently. And so, that was how a singularly unmotivated person like Itami made it into the JGSDF.

That said, Itami did not forget the debt he owed his country and the JSDF. While he was a slacker under normal conditions, he was quite animated when push came to shove, which was why he could show his stuff in the Special Region.

Dear readers who have stepped into the world of "Gate" through this novel, I am certain you will enjoy Itami's antics. I'm sure that those readers who are starting on the manga tankoubon will enjoy Black Lion-sama's insert pictures.

Then, I look forward to seeing you again in the future!

Yanai Takumi

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